A Young Girl's Place in the Sun

Introduction

For the longest time, I encountered the story of Tanya von Degurechaff by chance from an online manga site and immediately enjoyed her character design and struggles against Being X. After reading the manga and watching the anime, I came across the fanfic "A Young Woman's Political Record" by jacobk and found myself enjoying it so much I reread it several times over four years. Then, I came across another Youjo Senki fanfic "The Cold War" by Embrace_goto_statements, and found it enjoyable too; exploring the world where Tanya became the head of state of Germania.

So, I decided I wanted to do the same here.

The source materials used for this story:

- The light novel and the anime Youjo Senki/ The Saga of Tanya the Evil. The setting when the First World War (With WWII pseudo-technology) kicked off when the Empire essentially took on everyone, and Tanya von Degurechaff was the main factor that allowed the Empire to keep fighting for so long.
- "A Young Woman's Political Record" fanfic that goes over the aftermath of WW1, the interwar period, WWII: A Young Woman's Political Record (Youjo Senki/Saga of Tanya the Evil)
- "The Cold War" fanfic is a continuation of AYWPR that goes over the post-war period and the rise of a dual/multipolar world: The Cold War.
- Themes and symbolism inspired by the Hearts of Iron IV mods such as Kaiserreich, Red Flood, and The New Order: The Last Days of Europe

This fanfic is strongly influenced by "A Young Woman's Political Record" and I highly recommend checking out that fanfic first since there are spoilers there that I use.

To me, Tanya wanted to live of life of comfort and luxury and so, she is getting that wish here: Being X will give her the once-in-a-century opportunity to have everything she wanted.

But,

Thy hand giveth, thy hand taketh.

Prologue

"The Devil understood the falsity of the hedonistic attitude towards life. Following the last war, almost all Western philosophies, certainly all Progressive ones, had astutely concluded that the human person desired nothing but leisure, comfort, and easy security. In this worldview, there would be no place for nationalism and militarist values.

Degurechaff, in her dogmatic pursuit of war and bloodshed, is acutely aware of the complacent idleness spawned by a degenerative peace. Work without pay is irredeemable but pay without work is irrational; the Germanian people, so accustomed to Teutonic struggle and self-sacrifice, seek a return of drums, flags, and loyalty parades.

Degurechaffism, a witch's brew of conservative populism, socialism, and progressivism, are, on paper, psychologically far sounder compared to the violent ethnonationalism of Fascism, the folly hedonism of Liberalism, and the genocidal totalitarianism of Bolshevism. Strangely, the Devil, unlike the two despots of our time, did not concentrate her power by imposing intolerable burdens onto her people yet the threat of unchecked power remains omnipresent. While Socialism and Liberalism promise to the people "I offer you peace and plentitude" and Fascism promised to them "I offer you struggle, death, and danger," the Devil promised the Germanians "I will offer you vengeance and purpose," and as the result, the entire empire bowed to her feet."

–Georgie Blythe, review on The Leviathan of Berun

Chapter One - The Crisis in the Danish Straits

The peace after a war is often more critical than any battle or skirmish.

President Hoovy, for all his naivety, blessed the new states carved out of the corpse of the Empire with the right to national sovereignty and put a moral dilemma for the Francois and the Albish to handle. Magyarozag, the Czech-Slovak State, Daneland, Lothiern, Pullska, and the United Kingdom of Yugoslavia were all invited by the Francois to an alliance called "The Little Entente." Not all of them accepted immediately. Ironically, Lothiern and Daneland, despite being the closest to Francois, remained skeptical and chose neutrality.

No doubt it was to contain a potential resurgent Empire forming out of the nascent Germanian Republic. I can't blame their thinking.

There was one problem, however…

The Dacians seemed hellbent on building a new empire in the Balkans; first by seeking to conquer parts of, if not all of, Magyarozag. No sooner did the ink dry in the Treaty of Trianon did Dacia mobilized its forces once more, with ambitions in direct defiance of the victorious powers. Given how Dacia is also part of the Little Entente project, Parisee is in open debate on how to approach this matter. While those politicians talk, people are dying while Magyarozag barely has enough time to set up their defense forces, much less set up a new government.

The new government, right….

The Magyar Soviet Republic formed one as soon as the Bolsheviks got the opportunity...For a brief while, they did enjoy their new regime; just long enough to experience a coup by the Imperial Eighth Army. An event that would go down in history as the time when an army outlasted the nation it served.

Regardless, the best troops in the Magyar Republic have been organized into a militia led by Magyar veterans who fought in the Great War. Surplus Imperial artillery and firearms in their experienced hands would be more than enough to prevent the Dacians from rolling over Magyarozag completely. Yet, what the Dacians lack in quality, they sure make up for in numbers. Where they keep finding more bodies for the meat grinder, I do not want to know…

There was just one area in which the Magyar severely lacked: no mages. The Imperial Mage Corps is scattered across the continent following the "Trianofication" of the Empire. Now, each mage has to worry about where he shall live and whose country he pledges allegiance to.

A bad mage is better than no mage at all and Dacia still has plenty of bad mages despite the casualties I had inflicted upon them a few years prior. As for the Magyars, they had me and the Imperial Eighth Army. At least, what remains of it. While I could call upon Visha and my men, the

common soldier simply took the peace at face value and went home to face the troubles there. All that's left in the Eighth are the warmongers and fanatic nationalists who still cling to the legacy of the Empire and the Kaiser.

Even though Germania was forbidden to have mages in its armed forces on top of a restricted military size and capacity, the Treaty of Trianon did not expand the same punitive measures to the new states. No doubt to earn goodwill from the people and leadership and to seduce them to a Francois sphere.

Despite Magyarozag being far from the most pleasant place to live, -I would rather join the former Kaiser in exile in Lothiern - having multiple friendly nations to protect me from Allied prosecution was a boon.

I was promised Magyar citizenship and a haven in return for my service to the new republic. However, given how dual citizenship has not been codified, I declined the former.

So here I was, in Budapestera, before the doors of Sandor Palace, to meet with the new Prime Minister and the President. But I was not alone: standing to my right was Field Marshal Mackenheim, commander of the Eighth Army and a living embodiment of Imperial nostalgia. His appearance is formidable, a living symbol of authority and military prowess to men like him. Picture a man of robust stature, with a commanding posture that emanates strength and confidence. Mackenheim's countenance is etched with the marks of experience, the lines on his weathered face speaking volumes of battles won and challenges overcome. His piercing gaze, framed by sharp eyes, holds a depth of knowledge from a lifetime dedicated to the art of war.

As for his personality, one would perceive a disciplined and resolute man, unwavering in his convictions and principles. For all his mad lust for conflict, Mackenheim embodies the old-school values of honor, duty, and unwavering loyalty to his country. He carries himself with an air of authority, yet his demeanor is not devoid of warmth for those under his command. Despite his stern exterior, I heard that there's a paternal quality to his leadership, guiding and nurturing the soldiers entrusted to his care.

He is a man of tradition, believing in the importance of discipline and adherence to military protocols. His unwavering commitment to his cause might come across as unyielding to some, but beneath that steely exterior lies a strategist with a profound understanding of the complexities of warfare. His charisma and unwavering confidence command respect and allegiance from those who serve alongside him.

It was odd, standing in his presence on this particular morning, considering he was supposed to be under house arrest. I suppose that desperate times call for desperate measures. Sometimes, I hear artillery shells coming from the horizon, each day echoing louder and louder.

"Argent," he greeted with an aged smile as he tipped his head towards me. I was half expecting his hat to fall off.

"Hussar." I answered back. Eager to boast, are we?

"Why did you come here?"

"Why did you stay?"

Mackenheim laughed softly before turning his head back to face the door. "There's still a bit of fight inside me left. Magyar or Germanian, these people are still my countrymen and I am obligated to defend them against aggression. If the Francois won't help them, then it falls upon us to do it."

"Us?" If I were to be further ingrained with these rabid militarists, I'd never find myself living a peaceful life again. "You're mistaken, Field Marshal, I am a mercenary now."

"What mercenary fights for the losing side?"

"A mercenary that wants to maintain reputation and employment."

Before he could reply, the doors abruptly opened with an aide quickly escorting us inside. Immediately, I was taken aback by the disorganized conduct of the bureaucrats and military personnel: secretaries scurried like mice while men shouted at each other over missing inventories, quotas, and updates from the frontlines. The aide quickly apologized for the sight before leading us to the conference room.

Cigar smoke greeted me first before the Magyar High Command did. It was obvious that they had served in the Imperial Army, given how quickly they saluted both me and Mackenheim. As for the civilian leadership…

"Where's the president?" I immediately asked, scrutinizing the room. "Where's the prime minister?"

Like children who lost their toys in the sand, the gathered men looked at each other, the corners of the room, and at the table before finally landing their eyes on the man sitting stoically in the center. He had a thin haircut with a round face and body; unlike the rest, he looked more like a lawyer than a warmonger. We locked eyes while Mackenheim searched for his seat. After a brief while, he backed down from my gaze, suddenly finding interest in a map of the Magyar-Dacian border.

"Are you the new leader of Magyarozag?"

"The new Prime Minister. Yes." He introduced himself to me more properly this time: "I am Gyula Gombos."

"Where's the President?"

"The regent is attending the frontlines to boost morale among the soldiers."

'Regent?"

"Yes, his Excellency is Miklos Horvath."

"I thought this was a republic."

"We became a kingdom."

"Where's your king?"

"Still searching for one."

"Gentlemen, and my lady," Mackenheim interrupted, "Let us focus on more dire matters."

"Right." The Prime Minister nodded before facing me, despite his new-found courage, he looked at me as if I was a lion ready to devour him. "We need your help. Badly. I know that our 'relationship' is strained after the collapse of the Empire - I want to secure Magyar independence, from Germania, from Dacia, from Rumelia…"

"Isn't the Francois Republic going to help? After all, you sided with Parisee over Berun."

"Some help! The last time I communicated with the Francois, they only assured me they would open negotiations with Dacia to offer a 'compromise' to preserve the alliance and maintain the peace. Compromise! I can't 'compromise' half my country away to the Dacians. If, by some miracle, the Francois has set up a conference, we need a decisive victory to tip the debate in our favor!"

"What a predicament. You traded an 'oppressive' master for a neglectful one." I tipped my head over to Mackenheim. "You have the Eighth Army. Use them."

"We need mobility and air superiority." One of the Magyar commanders stated, "The river Tisza is a double-edged sword - the Dacians are dug in on the other side as well. It would be the return of trench warfare. We only hold a couple of cities that are across the river but they're subject to the brunt of the Dacian assault."

"In addition, most of my men are tired of war and want to return home. If it becomes a war of attrition, the remaining will surely die or desert," the Field Marshal spoke up. "Magyarozag called for aid and it was you, not the Francois, who arrived."

Just great.

"Name your price…" Gombos said dejectedly.

Being X, what kind of scheme is this?!

"I want lodgings, clothing, amenities, and a salary fitting for my rank and service for the duration of this war. Do you want me to protect Magyarozag from Dacia? Then make sure you protect me from the Francois and the Albish. They want my head on a silver platter and I expect you to give them an empty wooden bowl. Also, I need a computation orb."

Another restriction on Germania that does not affect a Francois "ally."

"I understand…and would it be possible if you could - not saying that your skills are insufficient - but if you could gather other mages interested in this conflict?"

"As long as you extend these terms to any volunteer as well, assuming they get here in time - now let's discuss strategy."

It was like the Great War never ended and the Dacian Campaign never occurred. The only difference is that I don't have the 203rd Aerial Battalion Wing at my side. As soon as word got out that I had sided with the Magyars, the Francois were quick to place another restriction on Germania, preventing former mages from finding employment in Magyarozag; a policy which proved deeply unpopular for the new government in Berun to carry out. Smuggling in Germanian mages was out of the picture as the Magyars had used up all their political favours to keep me in the war. For that, I was to be their golden goose.

Of course, that didn't stop mages from Yugoslavia and the Czcho-Slovak State from coming here. Despite Dacian protest, the nations simply shrugged their shoulders and pointed to the freedom of movement between allied nations guaranteed in the Little Entente. Daneland, Lothiern, and Pullska were more vocal in their condemnation of Dacia; rumors even flew that Warschau was contemplating leaving the Little Entente in protest.

And so formed Freikorps Degurechaff, as the Magyars and Mackenheim call it: a foreign volunteer force of 200 aerial mages of varying experience and training that will help preserve Magyarozag's independence and, hopefully, punish the Dacians for their transgressions. Although these volunteer mages aren't as good as Visha or Koenig, they will have to do.

At least the Prime Minister made good use of his promise and acquired us some standard Imperial computation orbs, as well as whatever surplus he could secure, though the remaining equipment was far from the high-quality hardware usually granted to the 203rd. While he was certainly happy that I took up the mantle, Gombos' mood reached the moon as he was downright ecstatic to have me as his attack dog.

Looking before the men standing at my attention, I could tell that at least basic training could be skipped. However, these were Serbs, Bosniaks, Carthinians, Croats, Slovaks, Czechs, Pules, and every other ethnic group that made up the former southern half of the Empire.

"First things first, can anyone here speak Germanian?"

"Ja!" they answered in unison.

"Can anyone here speak Germanian fluently?"

"Ja!"

"Nein!"

"Vielleicht!"

Good enough, I suppose. I don't have the time to get translators and spare the effort to relay my commands in half a dozen different languages; the burdens of what was once a multiethnic military. At least the Empire was wise enough to invest in education and promote bilingualism to give their ethnic minorities some incentive to conform rather than the coercive assimilation of places like the former Russy Empire.

As High Command coalesced to discuss new battle plans, a great debate on how to approach a counteroffensive arose.

Lieutenant-General Elemer Gorondy-Novak proposed a multi-prong offensive using the cities of Tokaj, Tizafured, Szolnok, Szentes, and Szeged as launchpads to secure and get across the river. With multiple points of entry, he argued that the Dacians would not be able to concentrate all their forces on each area at the same time.

Field Marshal Mackenheim suggested a single but massive push straight to Debrecen. With Freikorps Degurecaff and the Eighth Army acting as the echelon of the "spear", it could poke a massive hole through the river defenses and allow the infantry and cavalry to spread through the interior. It was a bold plan but the concentration of our combined forces would give us local numerical and artillery superiority.

It could work, assuming that the Dacians do not have their rapid response forces like the 203rd. Assuming either plan works, the Carpathian Mountains remain a geographic obstacle and although Mackenheim had the most experience fighting and occupying Dacia, he did not have the 200,000 men he once led in the Great War.

There would be a pivot to the south to push north into Bachurest. If we could destroy the Dacian forces in the initial offensive, then both Parisee and Bachurest could be brought to the negotiation table. If not, then Budapestera is free to dictate its terms. I can only imagine that

blood and vengeance are on their minds. Already, Magyar nationalists seek to conquer Transylvania due to the large presence of Dacian Magyars living in the area.

If the Empire did not exist, the Balkans would've been a powder keg of strife. It's already fortunate enough that Yugoslavia didn't fall apart like the Empire nor did Rumelia seek to expand northward.

Given our shared cultural and military connection, I opted to endorse Mackenheim's strategy. The rest of the brass followed suit.

With everyone briefed, it was time for action. The Second platoon was to provide constant air support for Mackenheim's men, using their artillery spells to break up any concentration of units. The Third Platoon was to go further ahead to identify any secondary defensive lines the Dacians would have set up and locate weak points for the troops to exploit. The First Platoon, meanwhile, was to accompany me for a more direct mission.

Being X must have wanted me to win since the skies were clear and the sun was bright enough to give me the full visual of the battlefield for kilometers around. It was great for my company, bad for the Dacians, and worrying for me.

What is its plan now? A brief window of triumph before casting me down into the earth like Icarus? No…Being X wouldn't.

Regardless, the Dacians endured a heavy artillery barrage by Mackenheim's howitzers to soften up the trenches and wooden bunkers surrounding Tiszafured. Using optical illusion spells, my Freikorps flew closer to the first set of designated objectives: machine gun nests and field guns. Without the pressure of heavy firepower, our ground units would have had an easier time forcing a breakthrough.

Already, I could see the Dacians bending under pressure from the onslaught. Machenheim's panzers made short work of the helpless infantry who were left with ruined anti-tank guns. Besides a bundle of grenades or a satchel charge, the Dacians had little to effectively fight back against the armored vehicles and were mowed down whenever they attempted to get close to one.

The trenches were quickly overrun by stormtrooper battalions using their flamethrowers and new SMGs to clear out the stragglers. Although it seems Dacia had brought their anti-mage guns, they failed to set them up properly in time before the guns were picked off one by one by the Third Platoon or by the infantry mortars.

We were moments away from a total Dacian rout, but my attention was focused elsewhere. Far in the distance, I spotted what appeared to be a command bunker using my observation spell. A simple target, really, as I raised my rifle once more and prayed to Being X for salvation. No matter what, the words were not evidence of devotion, only routine duty.

O'Heavenly Father, Creator and Master of all, save us from the fire and deliver your judgment on the wrathful.

One shot was all it took as it fell upon the Dacian commander like a hammer of God. The mushroom cloud on the horizon was a testament to a job well done. Yet, that poor soul was not the last on my hit list. There is an entire officer corps I need to wipe out before flying to Bachurest. Hopefully, by then, the Dacians would be smart enough to sue for peace before I have to raze their capital once more.

Soon enough, I noticed Dacian mages flying in my direction, seeking an engagement. Signalling to my platoon, we raised our rifles and prepared our spells. I do not know what material Dacia used to train their mage corps, but it was sorely lacking. I won't even need to use my bayonet.

The rest of the Dacians, though, I'll leave up to Machenheim and the Magyars.

Victory over Bachurest - The Kingdom of Magyarozag annexes Transylvania - The Little Entente Fractures

Oh dear. That was not supposed to happen. Peace was supposed to reign in Central Europe! Now, the Prime Minister and Regent have gobbled up a third of Dacia's lands in retaliation for enduring an invasion. This will only ensure that the Dacians will plot vengeance against the Magyars for generations to come.

Judging the report, the Magyars suffered nearly 18,000 casualties, including the Eighth Army, while the Dacians suffered 12,000 casualties and 60,000 captured. To add insult to injury, Dacia lost many of its field commanders and officers - I may have been a tad too zealous with my spells - leaving the country handicapped in leadership. Moreover, the Francois Republic had promised further aid to Bachurest, granting more weapons, money, and trainers to rebuild their military again.

Safe to say, Magyarozag was out of the Little Entente in all but in name. Not that the people in Budapestra here cared; for the four months of fighting, they spent four weeks celebrating to their hearts' content. I can't complain too much though. Machenheim and I were instant celebrities and were dragged along to every state dinner with members of the Magyar government - another series of medals pinned to our breasts- while the Prime Minister and the Regent nearly tripped over each other trying to get their portrait with either of us in it.

Despite all the joy, the Field Marshal chose to retire back to Germania; the Eighth Army demobilized for good. As for me, the public treated me with free lodging, free food and drinks, and free publicity. Everywhere I went, the Magyars spoke and sang praises to me in German. Even the ardent nationalists swallowed their pride whenever I shook their hands. It was certainly a strange experience.

In my past life, as the HR Manager, I had to endure all sorts of unpleasant behaviors from my peers. Even fire them. The center of everyone's scorn and derision.

But here, living in the shadow of the Empire's defeat, victory was everywhere. But if the people knew what would come in the future, would they still celebrate? What was stopping Dacia from returning with a vengeance?

As the only pessimist in this entire city, I simply drank my coffee in silence as I continued to read through the paper. Germania was facing economic hardship, the Francois Republic was losing face over the war, the Russy Federation was spreading the Revolution East, Albion was exploiting their colonies, and the Legadonia Entente Union was engaged in a border skirmish with Daneland.

What…?

The nationalist regime in Stockholm had pressed its claims on the Danish region of Scania?! It's like Illdoa - the Legadonians were pissed off for not gaining territorial concessions promised by Londinium and Parisee given how the Unified States were adamant on the "right of self-determination." Due to the reality that everyone owes loans to the US, Daneland kept its borders intact.

Until now it seems…

Suddenly, I was approached by a stranger dressed as a businessman approached my table. Must be another Germanian wanting my autograph. Perhaps I should start charging fees.

However, it wasn't a journalist or a celebrity fan, no - it was much worse.

"Hello Argent, I'm Agnar Larsen and I'm sent here to deliver this message to you. Written directly from Prime Minister Thorgrim Stromming…Daneland needs you."

Being X, please go away.

Chapter Two - The Crisis in the Danish Straits

War. What is it good for? Securing a better peace.

I hope that was the reasoning in the minds of the men ruling Stockholm. But in Stromming's letter, as Larsen elaborated, the Legadonia Entente had not dropped their claims on Danish Skaneland: on the contrary, they had spent the entire time since the Treaty of Triano pestering and agitating for their demands against Kobenhavn. I must have been incredibly distracted by the war against Dacia for this crisis to have brewed right under my nose without my notice. Unlike Magyarozag, Daneland hadn't joined the Little Entente nor sought protection from the Albish, instead having adhered to a stance of neutrality.

While I applaud their commitment to keeping the fragile peace in the Baltic Sea for as long as possible, the military disparity between them and their northern neighbor had only invited further conflict. Legadonia was only showing restraint because Pullska and Lothiern had threatened to place sanctions against them, as well as embargo their commerce. Considering Lothiern had the busiest port in all of Europe and Pullska was their closest trading partner, Stockholm had been wise enough to heed their warnings.

As a result, the "war" that had erupted between the two northern states was more on the scale of a skirmish. Despite that, it was still a worrisome event in what was supposed to be an era of peace.

Why were the Legadonians under the impression that they still had a credible voice to justify their actions? The Empire had crippled their mage corps, routed their military, and occupied their country. Not a single Francois or Albish soldier had set foot on northern soil during the war to liberate them; it was only when the Germanians returned home after the war that they finally found freedom once more.

That said, despite my irritation with the situation, I apparently don't need to do anything too spectacular. The Danish Prime Minister intended to simply give the Legadonians "a good scare" with my presence to get them to withdraw their claims. No reparations, no treaty, just me patrolling Danish airspace long enough for the Legadonians to sulk back into their homes. It was a good plan, I will admit. Enough blood was spilled for one year and it was not even the first anniversary of Triano.

Meanwhile, I will get paid, the Prime Minister will shower me with honors, the Danish people will adore me, and I will take my leave whenever I wish to return to Germania. Frankly, I would rather not be a miracle soldier to another nation spawned from the Empire's corpse; hopefully, this will be the last conflict I get dragged into.

While it would have been quicker to travel through Germania, there was still the risk of the Francois placing yet another restriction to inhibit my travel before I reached Lubeck. With

Larsen's recommendation, we took a train to Pullska instead to join the Danish embassy there before taking a flight to Kobenhavn.

However, I hadn't realized how quickly my fame had spread through Slovakia and Pullska.

Everywhere I went, military veterans would come to greet me. No matter their rank or file, Germanian or otherwise, each stop towards Warsawa was significantly delayed by servicemen as they proudly saluted me, requested autographs and, in the most exasperating of cases, insisted on taking photos with me, sometimes with their war buddies or families. As aggravating as it was, I couldn't let my reputation be soured so quickly by acting egregiously.

Yet, among them, in Radom, I encountered an esteemed fanboy: Pullskan Field Marshal Janick Siemens Pilsud, who had served alongside Rudensdorf and Mackenheim during the Great War. Considering the man's distinct mustache and strong head, I almost felt ashamed for not recognizing him upon arrival. He was at least relaxed enough to humor me and even recommended a few beer halls in Warsawa to try out.

Though on a more serious note, he wanted me to come back to Pullska once I was finished with the "Skaneland Affair" for some "business proposals". I promised nothing but some thought and consideration before bidding my farewell. Though, as usual, I couldn't leave without being part of several portraits of him and his family by the local press.

The capital was the worst. This felt like a ploy by the Legadonias to delay me, as my first sight upon arriving at the Central Station of Warsawa was a huge array of men, women, and children. Businessmen, priests, Great War veterans, you name it, they were there. Whether looking out the window, climbing on streetlights, or standing on top of trucks and cars, the Pules regarded me as if I were their founding father. Or mother in this case.

"I think we delayed long enough." Larsen commented, leading me to the embassy car, "You can always come back here to drink and dance later."

"Is this what I should expect once we're in Daneland?" I asked.

"Already forgotten, Lieutenant-Colonel von Degurechaff? We were once part of the Empire. Your first assignment was protecting our lands from the Legadonians." He looked surprised as if he had taken home a fraudulent imposter. "The world calls us Danes, but we're still Germanians at heart. I doubt anyone will forget your service in Norden."

Right, it's where I got my Silver Wings Assault Medal after almost dying in my first military assignment. Eight years feels so distant now considering how much has changed.

And how much remains the same. It seems I'm getting back to the basics: doing reconnaissance.

Prime Minister Stromming was a breath of fresh air compared to the other politicians I had endured in my life so far. He looked to be a figure of steadfast determination wrapped in a statesman's demeanor: a composed and dignified leader. Picture a balding, bespectacled man with a great beard and distinguished countenance; the lines etched on his face telling tales of both resilience and sagacity. His presence exudes a sense of quiet strength, standing tall with an air of confidence born from experience.

Conversing in small talk, I noticed how much of a 'realist' leader he is; undoubtedly empathetic, but life had taught him that kindness and mercy are luxuries guarded by a wall of cruelty. Given his position as a Social Democrat, it is obvious his governance, rooted in a deep understanding of the needs of the people, is driven by realpolitik. Though I was not here to be a new citizen, if I continue to stay, I could describe his leadership style to be measured and calculated, driven by a commitment to the nation's welfare. A man of true empathy. If only he had been the Chancellor of the Empire during the Great War.

How fortunate it was for Daneland to have Stromming as its leader. In this era of uncertainty, risking invasion from a regional power, a resilient mind might just be enough to see a return to peace. An attitude that we both seem to share, much to my relief.

For someone who denounces war, Stromming seems fascinated by it: or should I say, fascinated about me. Much of his questions revolved around my wartime service and the propaganda surrounding it. I knew that much of my performance had been mythologized by the public; but to Stromming, the hardest truth to swallow was that all of these achievements were accomplished back when I was but a pre-teen. The look of alarm and sorrow on his face was worth a million Reichsmarks.

"Let's…discuss something else." the elder statesman coughed, wanting dearly to change the subject.

"Indeed," I leaned back on my chair and sipped some coffee. "I think we should get back to more important matters."

He nodded before he poured himself some beer. Much like the Prime Minister, his office was tame yet carried an aura of quiet dignity. Simple yet opulent, decorated by artifacts and paintings celebrating Danish history - and Germanian brotherhood.

"Are the Danish Mage Corps subject under my command?"

Stromming shrugged somewhat haplessly. "I can recommend the military leadership to heed your counsel. But since you're merely a 'volunteer', I cannot give you full authorization."

"How many mages could Daneland call upon for its defense?"

"Enough to contest our own airspace with the aid of our anti-aircraft and anti-mage weaponry. Offensively? Neither I nor my commanders guarantee air dominance. The Legadonians have recovered swiftly since the occupation."

"Interesting. Would I at least be able to command my own unit?"

"As seen in Magyarozag? Certainly. I do not doubt your experience and leadership earned during the Great War. If there are volunteers, given your reputation, there should be no shortage."

"Just to clarify, I am not to fly across the border?"

"Heavens forbid!" Stromming almost paled at the question. "A war is the last thing we should be encouraging. Once Legadonia acknowledges your presence here, they will have to back down or experience another humiliation. They know exactly what you are capable of. You don't have to fire a single shot."

"As for the pay?"

"Whatever you were rewarded in Budapestra, I can guarantee the same treatment here in Kobenhavn, if not better. I will not haggle with the salary for your work. You are worth everything."

I am almost flattered by his professional ass-kissing. It almost ruined my first impression of him, but then again, I need to remember that he needs me more than I need him. A lesser mercenary would balk at the idea of being sent forth to intimidate a larger foe. But since I've already committed to being everyone's toy soldier for the time being, I just need to endure a little longer.

"Have you tried appealing to the Francois Republic?" I inquired.

"After how they treated our kin? Daneland is in a precarious situation, but not one in which I'd trust Francois aid. Besides, Legadonia had deep ties to Parisee during the Great War. No doubt they are already attempting to buy their support."

"As for Albion?"

"Nothing but empty promises. Like the Francois, they'd soon let Legadonia eat into our sovereignty if it meant preserving the peace."

"A policy of appeasement?"

"There's no other explanation. After eight years of war, the two great powers are simply done with more conflict."

I simply held my tongue. If only that was the mentality everyone shared.

"Let us get to work then." I smiled warmly.

Stromming's eyes didn't smile back when his mouth did. Somehow, I am the optimist here. A strange change of pace, to be sure, but there are other matters to attend to.

For now, Freikorps Degurechaff is back in business.

"If anyone asks, you are all from Pullska."

That was the first rule for former mages joining my volunteer force stationed in Skaneland. Given how Germania was right across the border, I expected an influx of unemployed mages to get back into the fray. What I didn't expect, which I ought to have, was to see my former company commanders: Weiss, Koenig, and Neumann.

And Visha.

These were the finest aerial mages I ever trained; I couldn't have asked for anyone finer. Nonetheless, I was surprised when they showed up; fabricated passports and all. Good thinking on their parts: I couldn't afford them being caught crossing the border and sparking an international incident, such a thing would serve only to distract the conflict brewing in Skaneland.

I, at the very least, admired them for their ingenuity and the need to be subtle.

Yet, it puzzles me why they postponed their civilian careers and jumped at the chance to serve at my command. All four had the support needed at home to cover tuition fees and living expenses to become magical specialists. Weiss was considering entering the field of medicine while Koenig and Neumann were applicants to become engineers. Visha looked too embarrassed to talk about her aspirations.

Once a war maniac, always a war maniac.

That's why they traveled north: to relive the experience of the Great War. At least their eagerness was something I was familiar with. No one in Central Europe had a soft spot for the Legadonia Entente; in their blind arrogance, they had blundered the entire continent into a war of senseless attrition, and what did they get out of it? Not even a seat in Triano.

"I should apologize if you were expecting some excitement here. But Prime Minister Stromming made it clear that we are here to be seen, not to disturb." I reminded them. "War is not the solution to this mess here. I already had my deserts in Dacia."

"I wish I was there." Weiss spoke up, a wide smile on his face.

Most of the men seemed to share the same wide smile and twinkling eyes whenever my exploits in Dacia were mentioned. It reminded me of the look children would give their fathers whenever they did something particularly heroic in their eyes, but I knew in this case it was simply nostalgia-driven envy and humor they felt rather than any sort of awe. After all, the 203rd had achieved far more spectacular feats during the war; by comparison, what'd happened in Dacia was an average Tuesday.

"Did the Danes store any Type 97s?" Neumann inquired.

"Unfortunately not, Kobenhavn could only procure us standard issue computation orbs. Still perfectly serviceable if mediocre by 203rd standards."

I had shared the same disappointment they must have felt when it was clear that Daneland could not and would not acquire the Type 97s or even the Type 95.

Still, it was time to get organized. Leading them to a former schoolhouse on the edges of Malmo, this place, for the time being, was to be my barracks and recruitment center. Though I didn't have all the mages from the 203rd, there were still plenty of Pules and Lothiernians I could call upon; a little over 210 mages under my command.

"Since we're not officially part of the Danish mage corps, shouldn't we have our own insignia?" Visha asked as I opened the door.

"You're not wrong, Visha. Usually, it's the Totenkopf paired up with crossed bones. But I have a meeting with the Prime Minister soon, perhaps you can come up with a design that is…more unique. I will adjust the command structure once I return."

I had no mind for making brand designs but a trusted and competent subordinate such as Visha would make the whole process an easy 'pick and choose.' I hadn't even considered the issue in the first place in Magyarozag since everyone in the Eighth Army had still been wearing their Imperial uniforms. It wouldn't matter in the long run regardless; this entire adventure was going to be a straightforward affair, after all.

If I could even call it an adventure. Thus far, it had been nothing but a whole week of patrolling. Stockholm's only response to my appearance had been a few letters of condemnation, and so the two armies were simply engaged in a staring contest in their pillboxes and trenches on the border. A phoney war in all but name, this was proving to be perhaps the easiest, and by far most peaceful, military mission I had ever undertaken in my career. It seemed as though Being X had finally thrown me a bone and given me a much-needed reprieve. If only he did it more often.

With everything quiet on the northern front, I activated my computation orb and flew toward the Danish capital. Per my recommendation, the Prime Minister should have already sought an audience with the Americans. If the Francois or the Albish wouldn't take a more assertive stance to secure the peace they had exacerbated a war for, it was up to the Unified States to take up the responsibility. It was the only great power with enough gravitas to curb Legadonian ambitions.

After all, the Americans are the ones so adamant about self-determination and national sovereignty. What was it that a former Francois president said?

God gave us 10 commandments. We don't need twenty-one.

Ah, American exceptionalism never gets old. Putting those thoughts aside for now, it wasn't long till I saw the City of Spires in the distance. I reduced my speed, the cold northern air whipping across my face as I began my descent.

"I will never not enjoy flying…" I muttered to myself as I landed in the courtyard of the Prime Minister's seat of government. Ingraining myself with the local security wing had helped me get past the first line of bureaucratic red tape, much to my convenience.

"How were the talks with the American ambassador?" I asked aloud upon seeing the elder statesman.

The deflation in his chest was all I needed to know.

"The Americans…are more content living on their side of the ocean," Stromming explained solemnly. "Other than promising a harshly worded letter to Stockholm, we…truly are alone in this matter. Since the Legadonia Entente showed no sign of withdrawal, I may be forced to open negotiations. If ceding the territory would guarantee a return to peace and security, so be it."

While I was not one to encourage war, I could not condone defeatism. Not after everything that had been sacrificed in the Great War. Such an action would cost him his career and, with it, his policies to build up Daneland into a stable and prosperous nation. Also, I certainly hated to see an old man cry in his own home.

"Contact Parisee. Ask about Danish membership in the Little Entente."

Maybe it wasn't too late to seek outside protection, even if it meant sharing a bed with the Francois Republic.

"Argent…I have exhausted all diplomatic channels with the Francois. They encouraged me to accept Stockholm's demands."

Not ideal.

"I'm sorry I've wasted your time here."

Oh great, now he's attempting to apologize to me.

"The ploy failed: they were not, and are still not, intimidated by your arrival. I will continue to deliberate with the rest of my cabinet. I will announce my decision by the end of this week. God willing, that will be the last thing I will need to do."

Stromming regarded me with kind, sorrowful eyes before dipping his head in a shallow bow and taking his leave. It will be a betrayal of the Danish people once Legadonia's borders shifted south.

So this is it then? This was the 'just' price minor powers had to pay to maintain peace in our time? Regardless, as long as I get my dues, I wouldn't get too bothered by a sudden shift in borders.

"Your Excellency," I called out, "What shall I do with Freikorps Degurechaff?"

"Seeing how the writing is on the wall, it is fruitless to continue employing your services here in Daneland. I'm sorry but your contract will have to be terminated early. You and your men are free to leave at your leisure."

Hold on. Freikorps Degurechaff is still new! Its members haven't even received their full pay yet. I suddenly dread having to deliver this news to Malmo. My subordinates from the 203rd are hungry war maniacs who were drawn to Skaneland at the promise of blood. They'll sooner ransack Kobenhavn like the Landsknects in Rome before they swallow their pride and go home empty-handed.

That's not even including what would happen to my brand! A mercenary leader that got her contract canceled in the first week? That's not a good first impression for any of my future employers or employees.

I can't let this be a complete loss of face.

"You should still refuse." I turned towards the man and looked him straight in the eyes. "A decade ago, we were a rising star. Our people were the beacon of knowledge and progress. A land of thinkers and poets. During the Great War, we fought like lions, through hell and back - do you remember those times, your Excellency?"

"Yes, I do." He looked back fondly at those memories. "What of it?"

"Since when did we decide to live like sheep? Is this to be the legacy of the Empire? Of us? We are not defeated because we lost one war; we are defeated when we give up and forfeit our ambitions to seek truth and order in an untamed chaotic world."

"I can see why your face is on every poster in every city. Do you truly believe this path is worth pursuing?" He chuckled softly, the light slowly returning to his eyes.

"If you want to know what peace and isolation have brought to Daneland, look out the window."

Outside of promises of material support and economic retaliation made by Lothiern and Pullska, Kobenhavn stood alone. I, together with the Freikorps, continued to stick around a little longer but the fact was that the Legadonians know all too well that they have a free hand over Skaneland. It wasn't long before an ultimatum was delivered.

And promptly rejected by Prime Minister Thorgrimm Stromming.

Now it was a game of chicken: Stockholm could either attack now and engage in an open war or withdraw completely to save face.

Quite frankly, after their blunders during the Great War, I would be surprised if the international community still gives the Legadonia Entente a molecule of respect. Even with the threat of sanctions from its neighbors, I doubt the nation would be discouraged from pursuing its conquest.

When it comes to strength, Daneland had the defender's advantage, experienced officers who were veterans of the Imperial army, and most importantly, Freikorps Degurechaff.

In comparison, Legadonia had a bigger navy, air force, and army. While each pilot or infantryman is inferior qualitatively compared to the Danes, quantity has a quality in its own right. In a war of attrition, it would be the Danes resorting to scraping the barrel first. With greater size meant more opportunities to attack, by achieving naval or air supremacy, the Legadonians could attack anywhere in Daneland. Even embarked on a naval assault directly in Kobenhavn if they wanted to.

Such an advantage means that my company and I would have to work overtime keeping the enemy's offensive in check. Which in turn requires the Danish brass to keep me updated as frequently as possible between each mission. The 2nd Infantry Division was assigned to guard the center of the region, although I have yet to meet its commanding officer, he reminded me of someone back at home.

So here I was, contemplating possibilities with a cup of coffee, looking down at the stahlhelm with a crudely painted Imperial Dragon on a yellow background. The mythical beast was the national animal of the Empire, second only to the wolf, to show the opulent wealth and strength

of the new nation. With the help of a tailor, we bought proper yellow and black armbands and badges depicting the dragon to go along with the makeshift uniforms we wore.

With the shallow sound of thunder outside the windows on a clear cloudless day, we finally received an answer.

It was an artillery barrage.

Special Thanks to my beta reader, AnticMaster, for making this all possible.

Chapter Three - A Day in Osby

All things considered, this was a very uneventful battlefield. No fancy tricks, no deception, just a point-and-shoot mission as we flew over where the battle was taking place. I could almost feel the disappointment reeking off my Freikorps Platoon commanders; they wanted a return to the glory and exuberance of the Great War, to fight through mud and fire, only to find themselves at a carnival gallery.

"Save some for the Danes!" I remind Koenig. Already, it was four Legadonian infantry divisions attacking one Danish. Despite being heavily outnumbered, my Freikorps looked ready to shoot their way to Stockholm and plant the Danish flag there.

Though the Legadonian mages were better trained and better equipped compared to the Dacians, they were also predictable. They were so easy to eliminate that I felt as if each kill was degrading my ability to perform as a model soldier.

Once the two companies of Legadonian mages were routing or falling out of the sky in bloody pieces, we gained full air superiority over the battlefield, raining down hell upon the advancing Legadonians. The Danes themselves fought valorously, still remembering the last time an armed foreigner sought to take ownership of their soil.

To think the Legadonia Entente could've used this golden opportunity of peace to start over relations with its southern neighbors and engage in lucrative trade deals; their lack of foresight had wiped any sympathy I had left as I shot my rifle and blew up a heavy tank. The geyser of fire and smoke that erupted from the vehicle was the only warmth they would ever experience from me if they ever attempted this stupidity again.

It didn't take long until most major targets on the field had been eliminated. As we weren't allowed to go beyond Daneland's borders, I was tempted to take the Freikorps back to Malmo until I saw a field of dust in the distance. Looking through my binoculars, I spotted a large movement of infantry and armored vehicles approaching.

I calculated two divisions' worth of men and material gunning right for my position. And accompanying them were… a lot of mages.

A few battalions worth.

Upon facing the Argent, I suppose their natural response was to throw everything they had left in their Mage Corps to drive me off. No special ace hunters like during the war, they intended to drown me. Unimaginative, but one couldn't fault the effort.

Well, if the Legadonians desired blood and glory, it is only fitting that I give them all they want and more. They wanted to drown me? I would flood them in kind.

"Soldiers of the Freikorps!" I shouted over the comms. "I hope you are done finishing your appetisers! It's time for the main course!"

"Praise the Lord in his name…the King of Kings of the highest honor…" I whispered under my breath. "O'Heavenly Father, deliver your children from wrath and ruin."

It was a formidable mass: the Legadonian Entente Forces, so determined to meet their doom. I didn't intend this to be an easy conquest for Stockholm nor did Stockholm intend to grant me an easy victory. The horizon was dotted with mages, outnumbering us six-to-one. There had to be foreign volunteers among them - Francois or Albish, perhaps both, wearing Legadonian uniforms.

Normally, I would've called a retreat or performed a fighting withdrawal to superior defensive geography. But since Daneland had gambled on me to deliver them victory, I had to stay put; my credibility was on the line, after all. Fortunately for me, our ground forces still had AA and AM weaponry to disrupt enemy aerial mages out of their formation.

"Maintain formation." I barked the order, ignoring the apprehension tightening in my gut. "If anyone deserts or routs, I will shoot them myself!"

Activating a spell, I picked out my targets as I slowly had my Freikorps fall back near the firing range of allied guns below me. There was no attempt at evasive maneuvers; it seemed every Legadonian had their barrels trained on me. Fine. If I was to be their priority target, I might as well make myself a distraction.

After firing one last shot, the head of a mage that looked no older than 16 disappeared in a fine red mist, I shot upward into the atmosphere to get the sun behind my back with my unit in tow. It was a textbook tactic: blind the enemy in the eyes and he won't know what hits him next.

However, I overestimated the skill of my volunteers; not everyone was as adept as Visha, Koenig, Neumann, or Weiss. While my subordinates had no trouble keeping up, the rest fell behind. I watched as the enemy caught up and were then upon my men mid-ascent; while the Lothiern and Pullskan volunteers were still considerably more experienced than what the Legadonians had sent forth, ten guns in newbie hands were still ten guns that a mage had to dodge from ten different directions. The angle I had been leading them also meant that the enemy was able to strike while they were vulnerable, hitting them in their backs as they had been flying up towards the sun.

If there is one rule about war, it is order, counterorder, and disorder.

With a sigh, I took out my bayonet and charged back down.

A battle in the air is akin to two swarms of angry wasps desperately trying to sting each other. Sending my three platoon leaders to get their groups organized, I had Visha at my side to cover my rear as I hacked, slashed, and shot my way through the crowd of screaming bodies and zipping artillery shells.

The Danes on the ground had their hands full enduring another frontal armored assault, though the Danish artillery was invaluable in keeping the Legadonian ranks confused and disunited. Despite being heavily outnumbered, the Danish mage corps kept their discipline intact, saving my Freikorps from being completely overwhelmed.

I had to hand it to Stockholm. Though they neglected their mage training, they weren't slacking in adopting combined arms tactics. Their tanks and infantry worked masterfully in conjunction, supporting one another as they slowly but steadily pushed further and further forward.

If I don't settle this air engagement quickly, the Danish infantry would surely be overrun, their guns captured and turned against us, friendly fire be damned.

Six enemy mages had their bayonets out like mounted knights aiming to lance me through, as Visha and I led them through a merry-goose chase. Whatever educational material Stockholm used in their mages, self-preservation wasn't included - nor were any sophisticated melee tactics. With my subordinate using a decoy spell to lure two away, I baited the remaining four into a feint maneuver.

Four-to-one: favorable odds by my standards. I quickly dived down straight into the earth, agitating them with my rifle shots into continuing their pursuit. They replied with their own, but it would take more than blind firing to put a dent in my shielding.

I had the enemy mages right where I wanted them. After letting them think they were chasing me into the dirt, I immediately changed velocity and darted off in a different direction. They were left to face a battery of quad-mounted machine guns pointed directly at them.

While not enhanced by magic, several thousand bullets had a profound effect of stunning my pursuers and shredding through their defensive spells. This left them open to my counterattack; my magic blade rent open a recruit from his thigh up to his chin, the second was bifurcated on the waist down, the third had the mercy of a quick decapitation, while the fourth lost an arm and a leg from my furious slashes.

There was no time to savor my small victory. Wanting to regroup with Visha, I flew back into the mage brawl. It was difficult to see who was currently winning the engagement, but noticing a few Legadonian mages break off and retreat to safer grounds, I realized the opposition was beginning to waver. This was our chance to break them.

Casting defensive decoys, I needed to reestablish contact with my lieutenants.

"Team leaders! Report! Now!"

"Team one!" Weiss' voice was the first to respond, much to my relief. "Experiencing difficulty - ah, fuck - gathering my group."

"Team two!" Neumann said, "I have group members unaccounted for!"

"Team three…" Koenig answered, "I think I found Weiss' men, or what's left of them."

"Gather what you can and rally to my location. Where is Visha? Report in!"

I needed to know her status as well.

"Behind you!"

I immediately whipped around to bring up my weapon only to find Visha skewering a Legadonian sergeant at the end of her rifle with a smile on her face. She was perhaps the happiest person in Osby at the moment - the Rhine still lives within her. I wondered how many more times I would forget that she is the most insatiable of war maniacs hiding bloodlust under those soft, delicate features.

"We played with our food for too long. Let us clean our plates and skip to desserts."

"Yes ma'am!" She quickly saluted before turning around in an instant to shoot down another aerial mage, the man's bloody screaming violently ending as he barreled into a tree.

Now, it was imperative we put the enemy to rout to save the Danes. No doubt they had their own hell to endure.

"Freikorps Degurechaff, to me! To me!" I ordered the remains of my troop to gather by my side. "Form up behind me! We're spearing this Moose!"

A concentrated spiral of aerial mages formed behind me, like a colossal grey arrowhead, with me at its tip. I charged forward, the mass following closely like a monstrous swarm at my beck and call. The Legadonian mages, disparate and spread out from the sporadic dogfighting, were caught off guard as the refocused formation slammed into their lines, breaking through and scattering them. The camel's back finally broke as the remaining mages routed and fled.

"FORWARD, FOR DANELAND!" I heard a voice distantly shout out, followed by a thunderous war cry. "FOR VICTORY! FOR THE EMPIRE!"

I looked back to see the Danish Aerial Mage Corps joining us in our charge. Down below, the Legadonian ground forces wavered as they suddenly found their air cover dissipating and

themselves very much exposed from above, while the Danes, emboldened, climbed out of their trenches and began their own spontaneous countercharge.

Of all the idiotic things to do! Abandoning a perfectly good defensive position contrary to strategic objectives just because the enemy looked a bit shaken! Once more human emotion had trumped rationality; now I had to work double time to prevent them from being encircled and overwhelmed by a numerically superior enemy!

"This job never gets any easier…" I sighed before turning to my platoon commanders, who looked absolutely giddy now. "Push them back to the border and only to the border, I don't want anyone getting fly happy and triggering an all-out war! Unleash fire and hell down below and up above! Let them regret ever leaving their winter cabins!"

There better be a bonus after this.

Despite the Legadonia Entente halting their assault and withdrawing from the outskirts of Osby, nobody had enough enthusiasm left to celebrate. The Danes simply dragged their feet back to the closest beer hall in Osby and drank to their hearts' content. If waking up with a massive hangover was a sign of victorious peace, I would still choose coffee and milk.

Still, casualties had to be counted and leftover equipment scavenged and repaired for future use. While I desired that this defeat would spell the end of Stockholm's ambitions completely, I'd rather not keep my hopes up. If an occupation won't change its mind, nothing will.

Once again, I was the center of everyone's attention. Even the Generalmajor of the 2nd Danish Infantry division came over to deliver his gratitude to the Freikorps, going as far as to invite me over to have dinner.

As tired as I was, it was a courtesy that I cleaned myself first to be more presentable. I didn't want to give him the impression that peace had reduced me to an uncouth gun-for-hire jumping at every opportunity to make quick cash. Fortunately for me, the gratitude the people had towards me was already paying off dividends: the local laundromat had given their best service in scrubbing the smell of gunpowder and smoke off my uniform.

I had contemplated removing the medals but, knowing this was not merely a casual dinner but a discussion to prepare for a second Legadonian incursion, it felt necessary to be kept on. It was important for them to know who I was, after all. Customer goodwill went a long way in brand recognition.

After ringing the doorbell to announce my presence, my mind drifted back to Visha and my band of volunteers sleeping soundly in their beds. I should've asked for a hotel during my stay but it was redundant now to receive better living quarters.

Once my errands here are settled, I'd return home and -

Home.

Where is my home? Was it still the orphanage…?

And why was Maxilliam von Ugar here?

What?

Maxilliam von Ugar was here!

"Sorry-sorry for the delay." My former classmate quickly apologized. He must have seen the shock on my face. "Come in - you're just in time."

Shaking myself out of my surprise, I quietly followed his path. The Generalmajor's quarters must have belonged to a relative of his; while not as extravagant as a Junker's estate, the paintings, velvet curtains, and luxury furniture indicated this belonged to someone definitely in the upper-middle class.

"You live here? In Daneland?" I pondered aloud as he led me to the dinner table. A dozen other Danish officers were present and immediately got up from their seats to salute me. Like the Magyars, the Danish uniforms were a direct copy and paste of the Empires', with only a slight adjustment in insignia to reflect Daneland.

"Here I thought Argent Silver's first question was asking how I got the rank of Generalmajor." Ugar chuckled, sharing a round of laughter with his men.

I sat across from him and I halted the servant from filling my glass with wine. I quickly asked for a cup of milk instead.

"Last time we met, you were at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel," I began. "What elevated your meteoric rise?"

"I would say the war. But really, it was after it." Ugar explained, "Most of the senior officer corps choose to live their lives in the Germanian Republic, leaving the former Imperial states in a leadership vacuum. Daneland was no exception. Since I was one of the few who could call Juteland their home, I was promoted rather quickly."

"Fascinating," I said, grabbing a knife and a fork to slice into my steak. I will never miss the days of Kriegbrot. "So your family resides in Juteland?"

"Yes. My spouse and children." The Generalmajor nodded. "Though my parents have retired in Yugoslavia, my sisters live in Lothiern, my youngest brother's wedding is scheduled to take place in Pullska, and my cousins are operating the family business in Germania. My

parents-in-law are from Magyarozag; they spoke highly of you in the defence of their home. Truly, it is all a shame; I used to spend my vacations in Osterry."

"How… lovely. Does everyone here have the same conundrum?"

It was fascinating how many officers nodded their heads and began their rants against the Trianofication of the Empire. It was irksome enough to bring a passport to a place that, in many ways, felt like a second home, and it was downright criminal having to manage eight different currencies.

It is almost tragic, comical even, how a few lines on the map could tear apart families and uproot their legacy. Add bureaucracy into the mix and there was no hope to rekindle that connection. Why, during the days of the Empire, one train ticket could take you from Amstreldam to Sarajewo.

"It would've been nice if the Empire had won the war," one officer bitterly complained. "My favorite beer costs three times as much now thanks to tariffs. If only I could take the entire brewery with me to Daneland."

"Alas, an impossibility," I said aloud. "We couldn't fight the entire world, no nation can."

"If we had better weapons…" He tried to shoot back before getting interrupted by another.

'You're thinking too small, Markus. It's our fleet. If the admirals had sunk the Albish Royal Navy off the coastline when they had the chance instead of hiding in their hatches in Lubeck…"

"Nonsense! Don't blame our navy brothers. It was our spineless politicians at home that cost us everything."

Oh?

"Spineless? How curious." I perked up. "May I have the courtesy of knowing your name?"

"Colonel Frederick Christian von Schullberg," he answered dutifully.

"Can you enlighten me on what you mean by 'spineless?'"

With all eyes suddenly on him, the Colonel slightly squirmed in his seat.

"I mean - you would come to the same conclusion too, Argent Silver. You granted the Empire one victory after another and the politicians squandered all of that. We didn't have the peace we deserved."

"How intriguing. What pamphlet did you pull that denouement from?"

"It was Rudensdorf. One of the heroes of the Empire. He saw what was going on in the Home Front. In Berun."

He what?

"Rudensdorf and Zettour revealed that the Empire was stabbed in the back by the cowardly liberal and social democrat politicians who used the labour strikes and protests to overthrow the monarchy. Berun was a hotbed for a Bolshevik insurrection…"

I looked around the table. Their faces confirmed they heard the same story.

"It's the Judenvolk," Markus said as he stabbed a potato with a fork. Most of the officers grumbled in agreement. "The Judeans have betrayed the Fatherland."

Suddenly, this joyous affair has lost its rich appeal. Judenvolk? I suppose it's only natural for everyone to have a scapegoat in mind. Blaming the Dacians remained a favorite pastime for the Magyars. The Pullskans pointed to the Russy Federation as the Empire's bane. I figured that Daneland had a similar outlook on the Legadonian Entente.

For the Danes to look inward is a dangerous slippery slope. The Empire was a massive multiethnic nation; once the Germanians scapegoated one ethnic group, they would eventually scapegoat every ethnic group. This internalized aggression will only cause a loss in productivity and high standards of living. How could anyone live prosperously in an environment ruled by fear and hate?

"Excuse me for the moment." I got up from my seat. "I must…find the washroom."

"Wait, let me guide you," Ugar offered, but I politely declined.

Upon leaving the dining room, I couldn't help but overhear the conversation continuing without me.

"I'm surprised that Argent Silver has not heard of this."

"Of course, she hasn't! Everyone knows what she is capable of."

"The Judenvolk are smart: they know that if their betrayal was revealed to her, she would spend her entire life pursuing them."

"She is the perfect exterminator for such vermin…"

"She'll know what to do with traitors."

Locking myself in the washroom, I simply stared into the mirror.

Being X, what kind of den of vipers had you led me to?

Why was I surrounded by these men?

As much as I wanted to flee the scene, I also didn't want to cause any rumors. The Danish officers talked like hens in a coop and I rather not let Generalmajor von Ugar be led astray by talks of racial prejudice. It was very unprofessional to allow perverse ideas to dominate military doctrine.

After spending too much time staring in the mirror and washing my face, I made my way back to the dining area. Even though I was absent uncomfortably long for the host, he did not comment and maintained a welcoming demeanor. Thankfully, the conversation has moved away from conspiracy talk as the officers returned to more mundane topics.

I hated to cause a scene in the night of mild celebration but the seed of doubt must be removed from everyone's minds. The young officers needed to remember how everyone contributed to the war effort. How everyone made sacrifices in the Great War. How everyone starved for victory, only to find food in defeat.

"Colonel von Schullberg?" I tried my best to present a pretty face. "This betrayal… where can I read more into this subject?"

Looking pleasantly surprised, the blonde man rummaged through his pockets as if he was looking for his lost car keys only for the officer seated next to him to reach into his own suitcase and pull out a pamphlet.

"You can stop your searching, Colonel. I have my own to share."

"My thanks." I reached out to grab the piece of text. "Colonel…?"

"Karl," he answered with a slight burp. "Pardon me, Argent - I have not finished reading the newspaper but you can keep it for yourself. The newsstands are full of the same material."

'You remain unconvinced?" I inquired.

"Unlike Frederick here, I'm not so easily swayed."

A round of laughter erupted across the table, earning Karl a playful jab from Frederick.

Looking through this editorial, this was perhaps the first time I struggled between reading and comprehending. It seemed so unlike Rudensdorf and Zettour to engage in this level of demagoguery. Quite frankly, this was disconcerting.

Overall, I still ought to applaud them for crafting such a compelling narrative. It almost reminded me of some employees I had to fire during my old life as the HR manager: crafting sympathetic life stories to excuse their self-destructive tendencies to keep their company positions.

So deep in their own pity, their minds warped reality to feed into their own narratives. They were parasites to societies and corporations alike. However, I was above such petty delusions.

"What a fascinating outlook on life." I sat the paper down. "I only have one question to ask."

The men before me paused their conversations and looked at me with great anticipation.

"How many of you actually believe in this garbage?"

I couldn't believe I had to play schoolteacher to grown men on how to verify their sources. Only children would believe things at face value, and that's what these men were: children thinking it was hilarious to blame all their problems on a friend. I glared directly at Ugar; despite being my competitor back in Kaiserliche Kriegsakademie, I held him in high regard for his due diligence and sharp mind.

I didn't realize how much of a sore loser he really was.

I explained to them in terms simple enough to carve into their skulls with a bayonet. The 'Stab-in-the-Back" myth was just that. A myth. A gross oversimplification of a series of unfortunate events that saw the Empire pinned on all sides by rivaling Great Powers. No nation, however strong, could fight and conquer the entire world through military operations alone.

Politics was a fickle thing. One miscalculation and decades of goodwill were lost in a heartbeat. Friends weren't permanent and rivals were guaranteed. Although the Empire had allies and friends globally, they weren't strong nor influential compared to the Francois. When it was clear that the balance of power shifted away from the Empire, our "friends" jumped ship to join the winning side.

I wouldn't call it a betrayal. After all, this was just how the game of diplomacy works. People were only as loyal as long as they had money in their pockets or the food in their bellies.

Blaming internal dissent was understandable: to a warmonger, pacifism is heresy. Sure, when the Great War kicked off, everyone was in on the plan to defend the Fatherland from foreign invaders, but that was before they were trapped in an eight-year war of attrition. There was no reality where the war would be over by Christmas. Since the military-industrial complex was an insatiable beast, the civilian side was given the heaviest burden. High taxes, strict rations, and

false promises - there was only so much propaganda a person could stomach when the reality was otherwise contrary.

"If there really was anyone to be blamed here," I concluded my lecture, "it is the Kaiser."

Now it was their turn to feel uncomfortable. The men, despite swearing an oath to defend their new republic, still idolized their precious monarchy. If I wanted them to listen, I better strike where it hurts.

"He abandoned his throne, his people, and his nation to the vultures and jackals. What kind of leader does that?"

It was hypocritical of me to spread slander against the royal dynasty but since Germania and most of the post-Imperial states are republics, I saw no harm done. After all, the former royalty was currently living a high life in Lothiern, unconcerned with matters beyond their own walls.

"Wasn't the Kaiser forced to abdicate?" asked Frederick.

"Forced to or wanted to?" I shot back. "I had sworn an oath to defend the Empire and its people, an oath I kept for eight years; what oath did the Kaiser swear to the Empire?

"He gave up the throne and left his crown in the gutter. A monarch that doesn't defend his people is no monarch at all. Only pretenders and tyrants have the audacity to claim rulership.

"This is a time for change and new leadership; a republic is the best avenue for the people's voices to be heard. Otherwise, we might as well be Parisee's new puppets."

SPECIAL THANKS TO MY BETA READERS FOR THIS CHAPTER: ANTICMASTER AND TURACOVERDIN

Chapter Four - A Special Invitation

Cigars. Outside of the military, they were Kurt von Rudersdorf's greatest friends. Taking a long, heavy drag off of his cigar, he was deep in contemplation and regret. Peace was strange. After years of fighting for, and eventually leading the Empire, he was back to his estate in Hannover, having to retire for the second time. Still, the old commander felt proud that he had served his fatherland well; if only he were twenty years younger.

Maybe then he could have prevented his beloved country from being ripped asunder by the Treaty of Triano and the damnable Social Democrats.

Though he was far from the windows in his living room, he was not alone. Due to his reputation, one that he was currently crafting through a memoir, Rudensdorf's estate was surrounded by admirers filling the streets for hours on end. Inside the house, however, his company was small but familiar.

His old friend, Hans von Zettour, sat across from his position; the peace also made him a recent retiree. Given the role they both played in those eight years, it was a well-earned rest. Yet, the feeling of disappointment was as unshakeable as tobacco itself.

Erich Lergen was the only one present that got a promotion. While the old guard was cut loose, it was Lergen who got the honor of being selected to become the Secretary General of the Armed Forces. Rudensdorf would've brought out his finest spirits to celebrate this achievement for the young man if it weren't for the fact that the treaty limited the Reichswehr to a measly 100,000 soldiers.

But despite all the gloom, today's newspaper did bear at least one good report: the latest exploits of his favorite aerial mage and her band of misfits. If there was an entire chapter in his memoir dedicated to someone other than himself, it would be Tanya von Degurechaff. Only she could figure out how to light a candle in a dark tunnel for two old men to navigate through. Lergen, however, seemed to be the only one looking like someone had set fire to this seat.

"You look precarious, General." Zettour broke the silence, putting down his newspaper to look at the new commander. "I recommend not looking at the new map of Germania. It helps calm the mind for a minute or two."

"I was hoping that peace would finally give Tanya the chance to seek out a new career away from all the bloodshed," Lergan replied, not lifting his eyes from the paper. He simply flipped over to the next page and continued reading. "But it's clear she lives for battle."

"Ah, mercenary work." Zettour hummed, "The second oldest profession in the world, historians say. At least she is finding honor and dignity in protecting former Imperial states."

He looked over at Rudensdorf, who agreed with a shallow sigh.

"Better our mage to be called to action rather than the Francois."

This time, Lergen looked up, seemingly more perplexed yet worried at once.

"It won't be long until she returns home."

Home. Rudensdorf held his tongue as he leaned back into his seat. The longer he dwelt on that word, the more pity inhabited his belly. His champion didn't have a home. She was from an orphanage somewhere in Berun. Her parents were forever lost to obscurity. That girl was born in the strangest time in European history.

He felt compelled to look around the interior of his estate, to gaze upon the ancient and invaluable heirlooms of his family name, the exotic wine and spirits stacked on his shelves, and his private quarters having the comfiest beds in Germania. Here Rudensdorf was, old and bitter, thinking of bygone days surrounded by luxuries denied to the common man while Tanya took the new world with unflinching valor and strength.

Her home was Germania. Her family was its people, the three men were like her parents or uncles, and her brothers and sisters were the soldiers she served alongside. Thanks to the cowardly President Erbel and his stooges, Tanya had none of that.

How could he not have seen this sooner?

War was all that Tanya knew. War was the only thing holding her together. Without it, there was nothing.

Soon, pity was replaced with shame and Rudensdorf took another puff of his cigar. This time, he held the smoke until it burned in his lungs before releasing it. No wonder she became a mercenary: to chase after a life that was never kind to her. Yet if the Empire was victorious instead, he wondered, would she still be dissatisfied that the war ended?

Someone of her talent would be the perfect candidate for Lergen's position. Given her record, Tanya was the first pick to lead the Empire's military. However, given the traditionalist mindset in the army, there was a glass ceiling she still had to punch through.

With what he knew so far of Degurechaff, Rudensdorf had a sneaking suspicion that she wouldn't let a minor roadblock such as that get in the way of her career.

"When that occurs, it is only fitting we welcome her." he said aloud, breaking free from his thoughts.

"I'm afraid we're already beaten in that regard," Lergen remarked.

"Whatever do you mean?" Zettour looked confused.

The Secretary-General directed the two elders to the page he was currently reading for them to get the notice. It was a surprise to be sure and an unwelcome one too.

"According to insider sources, party leader of the Deutsche Demokratische Partei, Heimal Schlage, has extended an invitation to the war hero, Tanya von Degurechaff, to join his republican movement," Zettour repeated aloud. "If accepted, someone of her fame and notoriety could drastically change the political calculus in Berun in future elections."

The manner he said those words was too calm for something so extraordinary. Though Rudensdorf was a military man first and foremost, above such petty politics occurring in the Reichstag, he found himself at a loss for words. His emotions locked in a feud more violent than Arene or Verdun combined.

At first, Rudensdorf felt great pride for Tanya getting recognized by people other than himself, but also great disappointment that it was the DDP of all parties that approached her first. Personally, he would rather the Argent Silver join the Deutschnationale Volkspartei or, hell, even the Deutsche Volkspartei. But the liberals? They all but ruined the Empire with their schemes together with the Kozis.

That's what Schlage was: a schemer. Despite being a "humble" economist and banker, that penny-pinching, pencil-pushing, Weimar sophist recognized the boon Tanya would give to his liberal party. If Rudensdorf were a politician, he would already be unleashing more profane words at the man for coming up with such a brilliant strategy first.

"What could Schalge ever hope to promise to Tanya von Degurechaff?" he finally grumbled. It was rhetorical, of course, to anyone with a remote knowledge of the new republican system.

"The Presidency." Zettour smiled. "Herr Schalge is gonna make her President and himself the Chancellor."

Only Lergen went as pale as paper.

"Would she even accept?" he blurted out.

Again, Rudensdorf felt his mind torn in two directions. The Presidency was the most obvious position for Tanya to be placed in. Given her status as a war hero and a history of apoliticalism, she could just get the coalition government to work and make this whole transition a lot less painful for the remainder of the decade. With such a recognizable figure as head of state, Schlage could rely on her fame and public goodwill to pressure any of the other political parties into signing his reforms.

Given that the office was the greatest sign of honor to any recipient, though he still despised the Social Democrat currently sitting in it, Tanya would surely accept after nearly a decade of national service. It may just be what she needs to finally throw off the attachment to the battlefield.

On the other hand, the way the democratic system was structured, the President fulfilled the same role as a constitutional monarch, similar to that of the King of Albion. The only difference was it was office-elected rather than hereditary. A President was meant to use his office to ensure stability in government, and if that fails, dissolve the Reichstag and call for new elections. Only by emergency decree could the President be allowed greater authority. Rudensdorf quickly feared what situation Argent Silver would consider an emergency.

There was also the matter of personality.

"It is a tough question," Zettour replied, looking back at his old friend.

Knowing the value of letting subordinates discuss matters, Rudensdorf delayed commenting.

"I… do not believe that she would be content - even after accepting," Lergen said. "She was always a leader of action. Not one to deliberate too long."

"Perhaps she would approach him with a counteroffer," Zettour replied. "Make herself Chancellor while Schlage gets the Presidency. Tanya gets the joy of running the government to her heart's content and he would have someone who could implement his liberal agenda far better than he could have done."

Again, it was a smart plan if Schlage swallowed his pride and accepts. Due to how each passing day brought more uncertainty and more chaos on the streets, a firm hand to bring order would be the first thing on everyone's mind and Tanya had more than enough demonstrated her capacity to fill the vacuum. It was just that she would be doing it for the wrong party.

"Regardless, I believe we should all give her a warm welcome for a job well done." Rudensdorf stated, "How is Stockholm fairing in all of this?"

"The New Union Party's Council of 10…" Lergen mumbled, returning to the newspaper. "Has been… replaced - following the humiliating defeat in Osby."

Now that brought a smile to Zettour's and Rudensdorf's faces.

"Perhaps the Legadonians need to install revolving doors in their capital." Rudensdorf snickered under his cigar.

"Political violence in the streets…" Lergen continued, "bureaucratic infighting…a national strike planned…and open talks of a Bolshevik revolution."

"It seems our champion has given our former enemy the full Weimar experience." Zettour smiled as he lit another cigar, before catching up to where Lergan left off.

As amusing as it was, another communist state in Europe, especially to Germania's north, was a great security threat. Unlike the New Union's attempts at diplomacy, there was a higher chance that the Soviet Russ would fully back the ambitions of a Bolshevik Stockholm.

At least the Legadonians still had an army to put down an uprising. Assuming the army remains loyal to whatever successor government follows. The thrashing at Osby was not a moment that would be often overlooked in future history books.

"On second thought, let's serve her some chocolate cake as well." He smiled proudly.

Lergen looked up in an instant.

"Let's not indulge her! It does not change the fact that we still lost the Great War."

"Don't panic, but you're right," Zettour conceded, "We're the mentors she looked up her whole life. It is crucial for us to show restraint and modesty when we meet her again."

"But we can still grant her a cake. Just a small one."

Silence returned to the room as the three men brood over their next set of thoughts. Tanya at the helm of the Germanian Republic. It sounded like the perfect compromise from his contacts and friends in the military circles in the post-Imperial states, it also contradicted what they said about her.

Why settle for a republic when she still lives in the past?

"Schlage opened Pandora's box, didn't he?" Zettour began, "Now every party leader with his salt would court Tanya like a hopeless suitor wooing a socialite, or try to find another war hero equal to her publicity."

God, if President Erbel sunk his traitorous teeth in Tanya and corrupted her with his socialist nonsense, Rudensdorf might just crawl out of retirement with his hunting rifle in his hands. No amount of prison time would prevent him from protecting his favorite warrior from the Reds.

Lergen looked alarmed at those words.

"Relax, General," Zettour assured the young man, "I know it will be unusual seeing Tanya as your superior but she will defer to your knowledge as the senior."

"She would," Lergen protested, "but she would also shoot up all the deputies in the Reichstag."

"A sentiment shared by every patriot in Germania for signing the Treaty of Triano." Rudensdorf interjected, "She isn't completely bloodthirsty - I reckon a third only needs to be in front of the firing squad."

"Still, we are a year off from experiencing our first election as a Republic." Zettour said, "God only knows where Tanya would end up with which party."

This battle was a disaster. Though only 20 of my volunteers have perished, 150 were wounded at varying degrees. There weren't any lost limbs or organs but such a high count made Freikorps Degurechaff combat inoperable for the time being. By comparison, the 2nd Infantry Division suffered only a quarter casualties. It was a pyrrhic victory in every sense of the word.

If the Legadonians returned, it was safe to say we would have been thoroughly pushed back. Even though I could theoretically scrounge up additional volunteers from Germania or the other sister republics, Stromming would not have the political capital to continue resisting the onslaught. Only the Danish Straits prevented a complete overrun of Daneland.

That being said, at least peace was secured for now. I flew to Kobenhavn to receive my payment, perhaps to negotiate for a higher bonus in driving off a Legadonian offensive, and ask for a favor. It was surprising to see Stromming nearly bend over to kiss the ground where I landed. He didn't do that exactly but he did kiss my hand. It was certainly awkward for everyone involved.

An aide secretly told me that the Prime Minister had been sweating bullets as soon as he'd heard the news of the Battle of Osby. Apparently, he had locked himself in the nearest chapel praying for some kind of deliverance. My mind turned sour once I realized that Being X was extracting faith through extortion. A heavenly protection racket.

Regardless, I got my money and when I asked for a bonus, Stromming paid through the nose. I was even welcome to extend my stay here indefinitely. Considering what I had in mind, I wouldn't need to stay any longer than a couple of weeks.

First, I had to write a eulogy for my fallen soldiers. A series of letters dedicated to their families back at Lothiern and Pullska. Personally, I haven't ingrained myself with the volunteers as I liked, much less trained them to proper mage standards. Knowing that their relatives wanted nothing but good news, I embellished the words a bit; praising their service to Daneland, protecting their countrymen, and carrying the legacy of the Empire in their hearts.

The only thing I didn't exaggerate was their courage. I was obviously bluffing when I said I'd kill any deserters. No one wants to work for a boss that rewards personal failures with death.

Instead of paying for a courier - not that I was lacking funds - I simply gave it to the volunteers who were packing up their belongings and returning home. Since some of them were old friends to the fallen, I could count on them to deliver the letters directly to the next line of kin.

With that errand settled, I turned my attention to a greater concern: anti-Semitism. Truth be told, I wasn't totally blind to the sentiment spreading among the upper echelons of Germanian society like a virus before trickling down to the middle and lower classes. "Looking like a Judean" was a popular insult among cadets during the academy years though such schoolyard insults were never spoken near my presence.

An empire split apart by external forces can always pull itself back together. But one where its people are divided and prejudiced against each other? Its death would be inevitable. Hatred breeds conflict as surely as an ocean creates storms.

I had hoped that the Great War would demonstrate empirical evidence disapproving of the existence of a Judean Cabal secretly controlling the world governments and orchestrating the whole conflict. Hundreds of thousands of Judeans had volunteered for the Imperial military, and I know that the Francois Republic and Russy Federation had deployed similar numbers of them. But ever since the Empire had lost the war, the conspiracy theorists had gained a monopoly on ideas explaining its defeat.

Which made this project with the Prime Minister extremely important.

"Argent," he began.

"Please, call me Tanya."

"Um, right. Tanya… I appreciate you for bringing this topic to my attention. I… understand that anger and despair dominate the minds of the men and women who sacrificed so much during the war…"

"Stromming, this is urgent. If we do not nip this cancer in the bud, we will never be able to purge it from the hearts and minds of the people we serve."

"You suggest I haven't done enough?! A Judean manager at a warehouse was hanged by a mob of fascists two days before you arrived. They accused him of being a Legadonian spy. I had tried to enforce the rule of law but the local judge proved sympathetic to their cause. Telling my constituents about the slanderous rhetoric of the Stab-in-the-Back myth was a straightforward affair but it was like speaking to the deaf."

"Have you tried talking with the other political parties?" I suggested.

"I already did! The Conservatives may speak of cultural tolerance but they are ethno-nationalists in their own homes. I'm a Social Democrat, for God's sake! But they call me a "Judean Bolshevik" in their beer halls. If they didn't listen to me then, they surely won't listen to me now."

No, they wouldn't. Not when a country was polarized in such a manner.

"But they will listen to me." I declared, "These Danish idiots have nothing to hold against me. Not against everything I have accomplished."

The Prime Minister's eyes seemed to gleam at my words as his mind went to work immediately on how to best implement my proposal.

"After that…unfortunate display I witnessed while a guest in Osby, I have taken the liberty to draft my response to these claims of the treachery of betrayal," I stated, reaching into my suitcase and pulling out a stack of paper - my latest essay. "Send these to media outlets sympathetic to our cause. Remember that they publish it under my name and signature first before you come out with a public statement to add legitimacy to my words."

"As for the proponents of this "Stab-in-the-back" myth?" he asked.

It was a fair question. It wasn't enough to counter these false narratives through words alone. The slanderers and liars themselves must also be held accountable and see the error of their ways before they land themselves in a position they might regret. While it was a fool's hope to wipe away racism completely, it was necessary that such a fringe ideology never make its way to mainstream politics. It was bad for business and personal health, after all.

"I will talk to them."

"Tanya, if I may, knowing what you have done and still capable of doing, nothing is as simple as a talk."

Touche. He was right on that matter. This isn't a battle of logic and rationality. Quite the opposite. This is a war of emotions and faith. It's about what people believe and want to believe.

Since the Middle Ages, long before the Imperial Unification, the region of Germania was known internationally as the center of knowledge and ingenuity. Some of history's greatest philosophers, artists, generals, theologians, and statesmen were Germanian. For having so many accomplishments tied to their culture, it was obvious that nationalism would paint a distorted reality that the Empire was infallible and its people incorruptible. The reputation was impossible to maintain indefinitely.

Faced with defeat, Germanians sought answers that could somehow deflect blame away from their hubris and allow them to continue living their lives without addressing the fundamental issues of their society. At least in my original life, when the company experienced a year of low

profits or generally poor performance, it resorted to purging the staff of "excess" employees. I knew full well then that if I didn't make myself valuable to the company, I would be the first one on the chopping block.

While firing low-productive workers could potentially harm the business, especially if they had a hidden talent that the CEOs have failed to recognize and exploit, blaming the customer base for not purchasing their services or products was a guaranteed way to kill the entire enterprise. In a democratic rule of law where every vote matters, such delusional thinking would prevent any meaningful progress and necessary change to a country living in post-war Europe.

"If they continue to be stubborn, I will personally drag them to the nearest war memorial and shove their face in a tombstone of a fallen Judean soldier," I delivered with a smile, prompting Stromming to adopt his own slow grin.

"If the time comes when you need my aid, I will help you in any and every way possible." He got up from his seat to kiss my hand again, albeit more gently. I was tempted to tell him to start helping by not doing that. "I will talk with my party and the coalition on this matter."

Good. It was crucial that everyone in the Social Democratic party as well as the Progressive Bloc be united in this stance. With this meeting concluded, I flew directly to the fascist newspapers publishing such filth thanks to a list of names and locations Stromming's secretary gave me.

Quite frankly, I didn't know what to expect from pig heads relying on sensationalist media to cultivate a following. Funny enough, what Stromming left out was that the fascist movement was divided between Pan-Germanian and pro-independence parties, though the latter had only a fraction of membership compared to the former.

Since the pro-independence group was too small, too emotional, and too intellectually pathetic in their ingratitude towards the Empire, I found myself at the base of operations of the National Workers and Farmers Party, a far-right and loudly anti-semitic Pan-Germanian political organization. They obtained enough capital to set up a printing press, a youth wing, and a paramilitary organization.

Upon my unannounced arrival, the Danish fascists were initially shocked before greeting me with open arms. Whether left or right, at least everyone was happy that Legadonia Entente Alliance was sent packing. With their infectious enthusiasm at an all-time high, they allowed me unrestricted access to their building. As violent and unhinged as their rhetoric was, at least they were organized.

Placing myself to give an impromptu lecture, I waited until the silence was deafening before unleashing a vicious deconstruction of their entire movement and identity. The look of disappointment, shame, confusion, and anger was delicious. I thoroughly enjoyed drinking in their tears as they processed the words getting smacked into their faces.

Of course, their first reaction was the accusation that I was an imposter, an agent of Bolshevism, threatening blood and shouting racist and sexist slurs. In the face of their flaws exposed, fascists are always the first to devolve into raging imbeciles. They would have to swallow their pride except it was too big to swallow.

They would sooner choke before opening their eyes and minds to how reality really works.

Since I got their full attention now, it was time to switch gears and pivot to embrace their line of thinking. Sometimes, the most efficient method to dispel a conspiracy is to tell an even bigger conspiracy. Especially if the truth is disguised as one.

If I couldn't prevent their hatred from being directed inward, I might as well get the fascists to direct their rage and frustration outward. It may be the only way to have them welcome back the Judeans as Germanians at the dinner table.

"Seeing you all acting like animals in the face of Argent Silver, it is a small wonder President Mirande is laughing at us," I spat. "While you are all busy murdering Judeans, you have not noticed how Monsieur Mirande has slipped his hand into your pockets to steal your money and bread."

It was a lie, of course. Triano didn't apply to Daneland. But it caused the mob of fascists to shut up quickly.

"Our people are in a zoo cage for the Francois Republic to come and gawk at. Daneland has become another toy in Parisee's schemes."

"I figured the Prime Minister was a filthy Judean traitor!" one thug blurted out as if he was the only one who knew the truth.

"Traitor? That's what the Francois wants you to think. To act!"

With the crowd calming down and contemplating my words, I paced across the floor before slamming my first against the nearest wall for dramatic effect.

"How can everyone in this room be so BLIND? Blind to the fact that we have been dancing to the tune played by the Francois Republic? Do you think this was just a coincidence? Prime Minister Thorgimm Stromming knew this better than anyone in Daneland! Do you think he wanted the job to lead an independent Daneland? He is as Germanian as your mothers!

"That is why I am here! That is why he invited me to stay! To save the Empire before the Francois come in and corrupt what is left of its legacy. But upon reading about your actions, Monsieur Mirande realized he doesn't need to do anything because YOU, members of the National Workers and Farmers Party, are doing the job for him. YOU are destroying the

foundations of the Empire. YOU are killing loyal citizens of the Empire. YOU are doing exactly what the Francois wants you to do!

"Judean traitors, my ass! Who was the one who wrote the Treaty of Triano? The Francois! Who was the one that broke up the Empire? The Francois! Who was the one that divided our people? THE FRANCOIS!"

Seeing the gears turning in their heads, I thought I had them on the right track - but I must make sure they remember my message and stick to it for years to come. Time to bring out a lesson in branding: a catchy slogan.

"GERMANIA FOR ALL! UNITED AND FREE! FOR VICTORY! FOR DANELAND!" I shouted.

"GERMANIA FOR ALL! UNITED AND FREE!" They roared back with the sound of thunderous applause. "SIEG HEIL! SIEG HEIL! SIEG HEIL!"

Hopefully, that would get them to stop targeting Judeans and actually collaborate with them in building up Daneland into a productive nation. With my work here done, I left the building feeling exhausted. After I'm done flying back to Malmo, my first destination will be the closest bed.

"Spread the good message." I delivered my last statement to what seems to be the party leader, "If we keep focusing on rooting out internal enemies, we will never notice our external enemies gnawing at our borders."

The man silently nodded before fully extending his right arm out at an angle, palm down and fingers touching, as if he was pointing into the sun.

"Thank you, Argent Silver. I swear I will never be fooled by the Francois again!"

"Don't apologize to me," I replied. "Apologize to the Judean family whose husband and father you helped slay. He fought for the Empire, did you know that? And you killed him. Has the Francois convinced you to reward loyalty to the Fatherland with murder?"

Chapter Five - DDP'ing Into the Water

"We shouldn't accept this." Visha protested, even as she still handed me the letter. At least she wasn't scared of speaking her mind. Having an honest advisor was an invaluable boon for a leader.

"There's no reason to fear the contents of this message," I assured her.

A letter written by Heimal Schalge? Leader of the Germanian Democratic Party? Sign me up! This could not have come at a better time. I was still debating on whether or not to disband Freikorps Degurechaff. We were down to only five members: myself, Visha, Koenig, Neumann, and Weiss.

I wanted them to return to the Weimar Republic to resume their civilian careers, but the Battle of Osby had reawakened the bloodlust in their hearts. They wanted to stay and follow my every lead.

Quickly ripping open the envelope and devouring the words written on the paper within, my heart immediately jumped to the moon. This was it! My break for my current hardship: a chance to become President of Germania! Since I wouldn't be the head of government, I could relax and be surrounded by amenities without needing to burden myself with the intricacies of bureaucracy.

Just rubber stamp Schalge's proposals and live an easy life being the poster girl. While it would be prudent to know more about the party leader, I believe I know a sufficient amount about his movement. Protecting the new republic, ensuring economic mobility, and guaranteeing individual rights? The DDP was right up my alley.

He wanted a meeting in Hamburg, which was fair enough. The city was one of the most liberal-minded centres of the former Empire, save for Lubeck, Bremen, and Amstreldam. The distance was too far off from Malmo: as much as I wanted to fly straight to the port city, aerial mages were still banned, so opted to take the train instead.

Visha, meanwhile, still looked skeptical. No doubt she had some concerns with the Schalge; the man was an anomaly to her. Ironically, for being a decorated war veteran who saw death and caused it on a regular basis, she acted like a subordinate given the opportunity to climb the corporate ladder: intimidated and mystified by the prospect.

The DDP party leader was smart in getting me on board: not only were we ideologically compatible, we also had traits the other needed. Schlage had the political connections to make the prospect of a female president in Europe a possibility, while I had the fame and recognition that could pull voters to his party like flies to honey.

However, I had only a year before the next election to prepare and jumpstart the Republican movement. If Imperial Nostalgia was pervasive in a half-decent country like Daneland, no doubt it was a hundred times more potent in Germania. They were stuck in a traditionalist mindset, and I would have to smash their rose-tinted glasses to get them to wake up from their self-imposed misery.

Democracy could only work if people wanted it to work.

Sharing the news with my three company commanders revealed similar sentiments as Visha. I suspected they were raised in old-fashioned households who were dedicated voters of the defunct Deutschkonservative Partei. Since the DDP was formed out of the remnants of the National Liberal movement, it was like I was asking them to wear Francois uniforms.

Using the Socratic method to prevent their heads from jumping to conclusions, I focused on breaking them away from this mindset just once. Yes, Germania is polarized. Yes, the Social Democrats and the Liberals signed the Treaty of Triano. But consider the alternative: did we really have a choice in the matter?

Surrounded on all fronts by encroaching armies, the Treaty of Triano was the best chance of preserving what was left of the Empire. If it weren't for President Hoovy, the Francois Republic would have had the River Rhine as their new border while the Soviet flag would have been raised over Warsawa. It was better to have your house demolished than to get evicted. In a disaster, a man with property could always rebuild, but someone homeless was doomed to stay on the streets, wandering aimlessly for alms.

The warmongers in the DkP would sooner let us be conquered by our neighbors and partitioned by the West and the East in order for the Germanian people to find glory in death. No, thank you! There was more honor - not to mention comfort - in being alive and recovering.

"You really want to work with the new system?" Weiss asked, still unsure of himself.

"Have faith." I answered, "It is that simple: having faith in the future and in ourselves. We were lions led by donkeys in Berun during the Great War. This is a chance for the people of Germania to dictate their fate on their own terms."

"Faith." He repeated the word as if it was a new flavor of ice cream. "But what about his majesty?"

"The Kaiser? Who needs him anyway? This country is long overdue for a leadership that governs for the people."

"Like you?" Neumann looked at me with bright eyes. Everyone in the room immediately jumped in on the idea. Visha looked ready to pounce on me like a shark for some odd reason.

"Relax, I would just be President. Schalge gets to become the Chancellor if the DDP wins but don't be alarmed, we're just going to hear out his proposal first. I wouldn't bring you guys in to follow someone who doesn't have a good head on his shoulders."

That seemed to placate my four followers for the moment. Once I was done saying my goodbyes to Ugar and Stromming, we would make our way down south to Hamburg.

For their last night in Malmo, Argent Silver's four most loyal followers gathered around the table for a night of drinking. Though they were free to indulge to their hearts' content, everyone drank in moderation. Perhaps too moderate, given the strange looks the waitress was sending them.

But to Visha, Neumann, Koenig, and Weiss, the war had still not left them. Traveling north to Skaneland, the Battle of Osby, serving under Tanya; it was as if the war had never ended in 1931. Speaking of which…

"The rumors were true after all." Weiss broke the silence, looking at his fireforged comrades. "Our commander's ambitions for taking over the Republic."

"But why the Germanian Democratic Party? The Germanian National People's Party are the loudest supporters for the return of the monarchy." Neumann countered, "It seems contradictory."

"It is most likely due to the fact they're old-fashioned," Koenig stated. "They want to bring the Kaiser out of exile. The DDP is one of the few progressive enough to entertain the idea of a female leader."

"But they are an anti-monarchist group." Neumann waved his hands. "It still doesn't explain why Tanya chose them."

"Perhaps that is exactly why she picked them," Visha spoke up, her eyes staring a thousand yards ahead. "She wants this to be legal."

The men chuckled before simultaneously lifting up their mugs to take a sip of beer. Tanya was the most skilled jurist they had ever met: compared to finding loopholes in the laws of war, uncovering ways to subvert fragile institutions that the public saw as Francois puppets would be a straightforward affair.

"It makes sense." Weiss grunted, "By winning popular support among the people, Parisee and Londinium won't have a clause to intervene to save Germanian democracy. Especially if a referendum is pushed forward by a liberal party."

"The Americans can't complain either without looking like hypocrites. Unlike Budapestera, we won't need a coup," Visha added. "Yet."

"The Major is the only one who still believes in the Empire. Only she can return us to our former glory." Weiss stated, "Her election will confirm it for the world to see."

"If the Reichstag can't see the people's mandate." Koenig shrugged. "We'll just have to tear down the whole building and replace it with a new one. A Reichstag that's for the people, by the people, of the people."

With that, the small group cheered, clinking their mugs together before downing their contents in one sitting. But that moment of hope was fleeting.

"It won't be an easy fight," Koenig reminded his comrades. "The Kozis are everywhere and will notice the Major taking the throne."

"It's why we have to be with Argent Silver every step of the way," Weiss said, earning everyone's agreement. "We cannot, will not, let Tanya be betrayed again. There's enough vermin roosting in our home."

"Especially that old hag Lutzebuerg…" Visha grumbled bitterly. It was a rare sight for the men to see her so furious but that was because she never showed genuine anger in front of Tanya. "Her and her Kozi ilk…"

"We'll have to address her eventually." Neumann stated.

"No need." The Kievan Russy glared at the bottom of her beer mug. "I have a friend. An exterminator. She'll know what to do with rats."

Heimal Schalge was more imposing than his handwriting would suggest. He was exactly the kind of charismatic and intuitive leader I would expect to lead the Germanian Democratic Party. Not a single thread was out of place in his suit; for a civilian, he was more groomed than some military officers I know. He scrutinized me behind those glasses of his the moment I appeared through the doors of his office. His keen eyes and calm expression reminded me of Lergen whenever he analyzed an after-action report.

Not one to be outdone, I glared back, never breaking contact, as I took a seat in front of his desk. We both broke into a smile before ending the impromptu staring contest. He poured a glass of American Cola for me before placing the cup in my hands. After giving himself a fair share of cola, Schlage got right to business. As expected, his words didn't disappoint.

"Your reputation precedes you, Argent Silver," the economist began. "It is a great honor for me to see that you are considering my proposal. With you by our side, the Germanian Democratic

Party is all but guaranteed to succeed in its mission to secure the liberties of the Republic's citizens."

"Please, call me Tanya," I answered with a smile. "The honor is all mine. Truth be told, I was planning to avoid Berun like the plague, but upon seeing your letter and knowing what you stand for… how could I refuse the call to arms?"

Schlage softly laughed.

"This is a very different type of battlefield, I should warn. Your rivals will be the conservatives and your enemies will be the communist rabble-rousers."

"Don't be so quick to assume I would enter this field ignorant. If this is for the future of Germania, I fear neither man nor God when it comes to accomplishing my mission."

"A very admirable attitude. As you are very much aware, it is an attitude that Germania needs right now. Let's face it, President Erbel is a decent man, but he lost too much public goodwill signing the Treaty of Triano."

"He had to." I shrugged my shoulders. "It was either sign the damn treaty or see Germania wiped off the map."

"A true tragedy, but his loss is our gain. We have until next November to campaign for our position, so your presence here could not be more fortuitous."

"Presence? Am I already a member?"

"Don't tell me you came all the way from Daneland just to do window shopping for political parties! Again, I am humbled that you took the time of day to talk with me."

"Please, flattery did not bring me here. Only honor and duty."

"So you accept?"

"Of course." I got up from my seat to extend my hand.

Schlage looked surprised for once.

"You're not going to bother negotiating your place in the party?"

"Herr Schlage, you already know what position in government is worthy of my name. There's only one office to place me in to guarantee the success of the DDP."

"Indeed." He took my hand and shook it. "Now, for the meat and potatoes. As unlikely as we'll see a majority government, I have already taken the precautions to contact like-minded parties to form a Progressive bloc. But with you, you could act as our liaison to the conservatives."

"A consigliere…" I spoke aloud.

The party leader nodded.

"They respect you enough to listen to any proposal you bring forth. We may need to compromise, but if the conservatives could be brought to support our agendas, Germania could finally see a fully-realised government, stable and functioning. We may not get all of our policies enacted but we could at least get the important ones passed through first."

So essentially, I'd become a glorified messenger if I didn't become president of Germania. Not the best outcome, but since I could influence policy more subtly, I might just see a desired outcome brought forth.

"I accept that fallback plan as necessary," I told him. "I can't let my pride get in the way of saving my country."

"These are difficult times." Schlage huffed, emptying his cup. "I suspect it will only get more difficult in the coming years. The reparations will be our biggest obstacle."

"We'll have to pay them somehow."

"It's inevitable. Negotiating for a more lenient repayment plan will be our top priority. The public would not like it but it simply cannot be avoided. Normally, I would send someone of high esteem over to Parisee, but I have a sneaking feeling you will not receive the warmest welcome as a guest."

"Please, I'm not dejected or offended in any capacity for not being wanted by the Francois." I laughed. "Creativity is our best chance to dig our country out of this massive hole."

"Couldn't agree more." Schalge nodded. "Now, about your Freikorps."

"You wish for them to join your party as paramilitary thugs?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Tanya, being harmless is different than being peaceful. Of course, the democratic bloc has its own set of defenders: the Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold. Freikorps Degurechaff would be a great addition to protecting our Republican movement."

"Then by all means. Let us combine our strengths into one united front."

"Exactly but first, we will still need to do background checks on your members. It is standard procedure."

"Don't be so quick to paranoia." I raised my hand to refuse his course of action. "I fought with the 203rd for six years during the Great War. I know the men that have served under my command. Their loyalty to Germania is beyond the shadow of the doubt."

"Be that as it may…" Schlage hesitated as I crossed my arms, my expression steely. He sighed. "…Very well, I will hold you to your word. But I expect you to enact your own background checks on any potential recruit seeking to join Freikorps Degurechaff, that is non-negotiable."

His own expression left no room for argument - not that I had any. I simply nodded in agreement and gave a toast to the Germanian Democratic Party and for the health of the Weimar Republic.

Rozaleine Lutzebuerg was old. The grey hairs on her head were all the evidence she needed. Her smooth skin was slowly conquered by lines too deep for a woman of revolutionary zeal. A martyr once said there are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen. Upon reading the latest news coming from the north, Lutzbuerg believed it now more than ever.

The Devil had come home to build a cult.

It was all… unexpected. She was certain that girl, no, that woman would join the fascist scum over at the Germanian National People's Party rather than the Democratic Party. But capitalist scum being capitalist scum, in the end, it did not really matter. The agenda would still have to proceed as scheduled. Once the proletariat had been awoken from their slumber and saw that they'd been led astray, the blond demon would surely be cast out of the continent.

Yet, despite all the animosity Lutzbuerg had towards the Ace of Aces, she also had pity. Pity for the orphan stolen by the corrupt military. Sorrow that she has been tortured by war and forced to become a puppet of the bourgeoisie. In a way, the words that came out of the Devil's mouth were not hers. A victim of brainwashing of the highest order. She needed liberation just as much as the common man who'd been crushed by war profiteers.

But Lutzbuerg had to close her heart to the young woman no matter how much it made her feel like Ulyanov.

Despite all the propaganda of a Marxist Messiah the Soviets in Russ claim him to be, the man was coldhearted and autocratic. She immediately dispelled those traitorous thoughts away. The veteran agitator knew better.

She must close her heart to Tanya, for the good of the party and the people.

Ironic though that Lutzbuerg came from a well-off Judean family in Pullska during the Imperial years and obtained higher education in Zurich while the Argent Silver had no such luxury. By all rights, the Devil should've been the champion of the oppressed masses, but life had a strange way of being poetic.

Regardless, the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands could not delay any further. With the capitalist scum having obtained their model hero, the Spartacus Movement had to be mobilized in order to win the coming election. The old world must perish for the new to be born.

Suddenly, a knock on the door shook the KPD leader out of her thoughts.

"Comrade Lutzbuerg?" A young feminine voice called out. It was Mareike von Hammerstein, a party adjutant and her protege, who now handed her a letter. "It's from Moskva."

Lutzbuerg's stomach turned. As much as she enjoyed the financial backing of the Russy Federation, she had to let God flip a coin to see if the correspondence would be directly from Comrade Jughashvili or Loria. Much to her chagrin, it was Loria.

She wanted funds and guns.

He wanted Tanya von Degurechaff. Alive. And unspoiled.

She felt her mind ready to burst inside of her skull. How can a man like him be so close to the Red Tsar? There was nothing but bad air surrounding that beast. At this moment, Lutzebuerg would sooner chop off her own arm and deliver it to the Vozhd in Moskva as a tribute than be complicit in another one of Comrade Loria's horrific schemes. It was men like him that destroyed the reputation of the communist movement worldwide.

And yet.

"We must host a worker's conference in Lippe. We need everyone present to plan our campaign strategy."

"Right away, Comrade Lutzebuerg!" Hammerstein disappeared back into her own office to type up the latest memo.

A drunk man's words were a sober man's thoughts.

By that standard, Johan Dressler thought to himself, Julius Rohr was a very drunk man. Give the man a mug of free beer, and he'd talk the ear off of a marble statue. Give him an entire barrel of it, and he'd talk his way to leading a national revolution. It was an extraordinary measure for such an extraordinary era. But make no mistake, Rohr's round face and rounder body hid a mountain of outrage towards capitalism and communism.

Ironic, since much of his rhetoric mirrored Bolshevik tenants: dismantling monopolies, nationalization of land and resources, and a popular revolution to establish a "Nationalist Vanguardist" state. A nation for the workers and soldiers of the Fatherland free of parasitic socialists and communists. Free of the Judean Capitalists that hoard the wealth that rightly belongs to an honest Germanian laborer.

That's why Dressler was here, together with his small following in the Germanian Workers Party.

But he was not alone in this beer hall.

All of the prominent far-right parties were gathered here to soak in Rohr's messages. Like all of them, he was skeptical of his socialist agenda. Unlike most of them, the Germanian Workers Party was too small to have its own freikorps. If Dressler wanted to stop the communists from interrupting his speeches, he needed outside protection.

He needed Rohr's Brownshirts, the Sturmabteilung, the largest of the fascist paramilitary organizations, a legion hundreds of thousands strong.

"Comrades, true sons of Germania, brave fighters for the future of our beloved Fatherland!

"Today, as we must stand as one under the banner of National Vanguardism, we must remember the sacrifices that have brought us to this moment. It is only through our combined unyielding dedication, our blood, and our sweat that we have propelled our vision forward."

Rohr may have been a drunken oaf in Dressler's eyes, but Rohr was the only man who could allow him the opportunity to implement his scientific socialist project on any significant scale. Why, when he brought it up to the brownshirt braggart the first time they met, the man had all but promised to make him the future Reichsminister of Economics.

"We, together with the Sturmabteilung, are the heart and soul of a national union, the Arbeitsgemeinschaft! We will save this country from the calamity and throw off the shackles of the Triano. We shall stand firm against adversity, against tyranny, and against the Judean vermin who sought to weaken our great empire.

"There is no greater time than now to push forth the great agenda! We have the vision, but the national revolution must be enacted! We must push forward with unwavering determination, for our struggle is not merely for power but for a vision—a vision of a new Germania, a strong and united Germania!"

Now the crowd cheered at his words while the leaders idly nodded or clapped in acknowledgement. Dressler stayed silent, weighing in what his rhetoric would apply. Talks of revolution would only drive away potential patronage from the media and industrial magnates - not that Rohr was inclined to accept any offer from the capitalists. The SA had all but sided with

the laborers whenever a strike was called, attacking strikebreakers and negotiators with open impunity.

"The value of the worker and the soldier beat within the core of our movement. We envision a society where every worker is valued and where every citizen has a stake in the prosperity of our nation. The SA stands for the people, for the workers, for a better future for all!

"Our role is pivotal, not just in the streets and gatherings, but in shaping the very fabric of our society. We are the guardians of this revolution, and you, its most valued leaders and statement, are entrusted with the responsibility to mold a new order, to instill the values of National Vanguardism into every corner of our Fatherland."

National Vanguardism. The third way to securing Germania's future, Dressler thought to himself. Could it be done? After the 'National' Revolution was secured, what comes next? Would there ever be a time for rest?

"But our duty extends beyond mere ideology. We must be the shield that defends our nation, the bulwark against any threat that dares challenge the destiny of our people. We must grow stronger, more disciplined, and more united, for the SA is the force that will secure the future of our beloved Germania!

"Our dreams are bold, our aspirations high, but through our unity and unwavering commitment to our cause, we shall prevail! Together, as Volksgenossen, as brothers bound by a sacred duty, we march towards a future where the SA stands tall, where our ideals reign supreme, and where our Germania shines as a beacon of hope and strength.

"For the Fatherland!"

Rohr threw up his right arm in a Roman Salute.

"For the Fatherland!" His audience roared back together with the far-right party leaders, throwing up their own right hands in solitude.

Not one to stick out in a crowd, Dressler raised his own arm up in solidarity.

No. There wouldn't be rest. There will never be rest.

As Rohr found himself surrounded by the fascist leaders, Dressler felt compelled to join in on the political pageantry. But that tiny voice in his head urged him to walk away.

The man was far from the ideal candidate: a rabble-rouser, an alcoholic; though a veteran, he was no war hero; and had the face of a brick wall coated with lard. He was not like the Argent Silver, who was chaste and immaculate, the literal poster child of the Empire in all of its might and glory.

He initially wanted to invite her over to join his small Germanian Workers Party but upon reading the news that she joined the Germanian Democratic Party, Dressler only realized how absurd the idea was. She would never join an obscure political organization that espoused a fringe ideology when there are more obvious, safer roads to acquiring power.

"Herr Rohr," he greeted, when it was his turn to shake the SA leader's hand, "You speak the truth tonight. I would like the Germanian Workers Party to be part of this National Vanguardist project. To be part of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft."

Yet the regret never ceased and in his heart, from the lowest pit, Dressler prayed to God to save him from whatever damnation he led his party and himself into.

Author's Note: We made it to Chapter Five and the plot continues to thicken. I appreciate the amount of feedback and comments everyone has posted here. This was very inspiring for me to see how much attention my fanfic is getting.

Chapter Six - The New Year

The year 1932 had arrived without much further fanfare, much to my relief - however, hyperinflation had already reared its ugly head. It was 20 Marks to buy a loaf of bread at the end of the war, but now it was 600 Marks and the trend was only going up. Party leader Heimal Schlage was doing everything in his power to prevent the whole system from collapsing underneath him.

In his role as currency commissioner of the Republic, he had introduced the Rentenmark, a new banknote backed by the mortgage on all the properties in the country. A good start, considering how the last currency was quickly losing value, but he was only applying band-aids to a severed limb. With an election coming this November, there was no time to waste trying to maintain public confidence.

While Schlage was getting the Social Democrats and the Centralists to help plug the holes of a sinking ship of state, I made it my role to be the party's hopemonger for the time being, imploring the Germanian people to not give into despair. Due to the size of the DDP and the amount of capital given by the industrialists and the bankers, I had every method and opportunity to spread the liberal message across the entire republic.

Having access to the radio was invaluable in my endeavors: other than a newspaper, I could put my message directly into the people's homes as a campaign aid. These "Fireside Chats," as I proposed the idea to Schlage as part of our political campaign, would give our message far greater reach than any poster or party slogan. At least, until November hit.

A chance to talk about the rising inflation in Germania? I immediately hopped into a chair and turned on the microphone. I was grateful that Schlage managed to secure me a spot on the government-scheduled radio program.

"The road to healing is a long one. Keep the course and be led not astray. We will make it, someday. Always remember: we have made it this far in history and it is just a little farther ahead. The Francois may laugh at us and the Albish will sneer, but time will show that in the end, it is we who will be laughing at them. Let us continue this burden together. Let us save those who can still be saved."

They wanted to know my thoughts on Triano?

"No. This is not a disaster. Our defeat, our collapse, make it part of our story of Germania. Our ancestors have endured just as great: the Black Death, the 30 Years War, the Napoleonic Wars. Time and time again, we have fallen. But we have always risen higher as a result.

"The strongest steel must endure the hottest fire. You cannot transform a kitten into a lion by giving it a bowl of milk. If we are to be God's greatest warriors, we must engage in his toughest battles."

How will we respond to the growing instability in the Republic?

"Look out your window. This is your country. Somewhere in these dirty streets and broken lights, under this sky and on the earth, you are still alive. Breathing and alive. Germania lives inside of you. You can do it. You can make this nation work. It is possible because time makes it possible."

Of course, it was not enough to just give kind words without any proper substance to back it up. If we were to avoid the disastrous hyperinflation inevitably eating away at the public confidence in our democratic system, we needed to be as transparent with the voter base as possible. I had talked with Schlage to discuss with the Social Democrats: no matter what happens, fiscal responsibility was the number one priority. Removing the breaks on the currency printing press would only spell disaster for the Progressive bloc on the campaign trail. It was only a matter of weeks before I walked into the radio studio again to give another speech.

"To the people of Germania, I want to take a few minutes of your time to talk about currency. Given the undeniable reality that a consumer's purchasing power has become increasingly shallow and insignificant, it is crucial that you, dear citizen, know how the government shall respond to this unprecedented crisis. As you are quite well aware, the biggest instigator of the growing inflation is the war reparations that Francois has enforced upon us.

"300 billion Gold Marks must be paid in reparations, in hard currency. Currency that the federal government currently lacks in any official capacity. I recognize that this is a massive burden to pay to our enemies in Parisee but it is not insurmountable. As of now, President Erbel and Chancellor Heriman Mulch of the Social Democratic Party have opened negotiations with the Francois-Albish coalition for more favorable conditions for the repayment plan. If we could get a complete restructuring of the debt, then these symptoms of a lost victory would be temporary. I express confidence that once we prove that we can deliver on our promises, Parisee and Londinium will be content to collect the cash no matter what method we use.

"To give our country the purchasing power needed to give the Deutschmark value, I propose a series of economic reforms, as a figure in the Germanian Democratic Party, for the ruling coalition in the Reichstag to consider with great interest.

"First, I suggest that we must turn our thoughts away from prioritizing short-term relief over long-term prosperity. To put it plainly, the government needs money. For too long, the world has remained ignorant of the untold wealth gained from international cooperation; the freedom of commerce and movement will be the most important action that we must enact. We have to remove tariffs! Entirely. Our market lacks customers and if we do not find them here, then we must find them elsewhere. If you want to encourage people to explore your marketplace, you don't install an entrance fee. Let the outside world see the marvels of Germanian engineering and craftsmanship without restriction, and our streets shall be gilded with foreign capital. In addition, I implore the people of Germania to place their confidence in the Berun once more.

Buy government bonds to help the nation rise back on its feet. You don't need to spend everything: 10 pfennigs to the Federal Bank for every Deutschmark you make would be more than enough to allow for a recovery. Have faith in the coalition to restore our place in the sun.

"Second, to combat the rising unemployment due to our sons, fathers, and brothers returning from the frontlines, I implore the Social Democrats in office to consider exploring avenues of expanding industrial production that would allow for the expansion of current jobs and the creation of new ones. In addition, a public works program is needed to prevent our patriots from rusting in their own homes. War has given the sons of Germania a purpose in life but now, Peace has demanded they contribute to the nation in more benign, less glamorous ways. By giving them shovels, we can solve the unemployment crisis by embarking on a national infrastructure program to modernize the republic's Autobahn and railway networks. Every village shall have a train station while every town and city is connected by a highway. Our country is a body and for a body to function, the blood must flow freely between each organ and muscle.

"Third and most importantly, the federal government must tighten its belt. Even though this will be the most difficult decision for the SPD to enact, it is necessary to curb spending on non-essential services. As the saying goes, strong medicine tastes bitter. The state budget must be reduced in any capacity possible while taxes must be raised to curb the spending deficit. I understand that more taxes are the last thing the Germanian people want to hear but it must be said. I am tired of seeing my countrymen being led astray by demagogues and warmongers like lambs in a slaughterhouse. Take it from my mouth, of Argent Silver, there are no shortcuts to success. No secret tunnel to recovery.

There is the easy way and there is the right way to wealth and prosperity. A cheater may win a race but a true competitor will win every race. The situation in Germania is your problem as much as it is mine. With your support, we cannot fail. Remember the next time the Francois and Albish slander the good name of Germania; our success here will be our greatest revenge."

By giving the SPD-led coalition an escape route, these economic reforms would sap away from the power bases the communists and the fascists had accumulated. Ideology is secondary to the basic needs of food, shelter, and employment. Once these programs were enacted, the Germanian Republic would be on a steadfast trajectory to become a stable and functioning state, or at least stable enough for foreign investors to become optimistic enough to start throwing money into the economy. Attracting foreign capital such as loans would give us further resources to inject into reconstruction.

I didn't expect the situation to completely turn around by autumn, but it should be just enough to prevent the radical extremist parties from obtaining enough of the popular vote to be a nuisance in future political planning. Would the SPD actually implement my ideas? If they were too scared to rock the boat before, the popular mandate would encourage them to finally take more aggressive action.

Schlage, meanwhile, was pleasantly surprised, shocked even, once he had digested my latest messages. Compared to his proposal, it was like going into a copper mine and finding a vein of gold. No wonder he looked scared: no doubt he hadn't expected a mere soldier to advocate radical economic reform. I might just steal his job if President Erbel finds my performance more than satisfactory.

Not all proposals could be as cheery, unfortunately. When I suggested that the nation's natural mineral deposits be used as collateral if we ever default on our payments, Schlage reached the same conclusion with great, albeit relatable, frustration. It would be deeply unpopular for Germanians to see their wealth plundered by the enemy; for the coal miner sees his day's work shipped off to a foreign land without so much as a second glance.

Nonetheless, I could tell Schlage would've loved to jump on the other programs with both feet on the gas pedal, but since he was still a tad bit too far away from any influential federal position, throwing ideas at the wall was the best strategy we had at the moment.

Given my reputation and immediate impact on the political sphere, it was inevitable that I would get the full attention of the other two progressive parties. Currently, the Big Three were the Social Democratic Party, Zentrum (or Centre), and finally the Germanian Democratic Party. Given how the monarchy did a terrific job in destroying the legitimacy of the conservative movement, the Social Democrats had the lion's share of the votes and the seats in the Reichstag.

The SPD, the most paradoxical political party in the 20th century, was both beloved and hated for ending the Great War and restoring peace in Europe. It was also Europe's second-largest Marxist-influenced party -though the Francois Republic would beg to differ- and Germania's most popular party. While I did not subscribe to their Marxist principles, I did admire the pro-peace faction that tried to prevent the escalation of war. Unfortunately, no one could stop the flood of nationalist outrage against them.

The SPD was large enough that one could say it was a big tent party. It was all too similar to the Liberal Democratic Party back in my old life, with its vaguely centre-left position and commitment to making Social Democracy a reality. Whatever that means. Between actual Democratic Socialism, Progressive Democracy, or just general left-wing Populism, pick your poison.

President Erbel and Chancellor Herimann were both in unenviable positions in Germania and they weren't as insidious as the conservatives made them to be. Erbel himself wanted to maintain a balanced parliament, an admirable effort to try to unite both the conservatives and progressives, but it was ultimately a fruitless endeavor. A plane couldn't fly without either left or right wing, but it also couldn't leave the runway if the engines refused to run or, worse, caught aflame instead. Herimann fared no better: being one of the signatories of the Treaty of Triano had also put a target on his back. The stress of being the most hated statesmen in the country

had made both of them sickly and weak. This was especially bad for Erbel since he had a long history of poor health.

Zentrumpartei, or the Centre, was a Papalist party. As in, it always represented the interests of Papalist Germanians, promoting Papalist virtues and "Christian Democracy". Given my upbringing and the obvious political affiliation of the nuns at the orphanage I lived in, the Zentrum was my second-best choice after the DDP. Despite being a conservative party, they were the main enemy of the authoritarian DkP during the Kulturkampf and vocal opponents against Rudensdorf's dictatorship. Like Erbel and Herimann, Halmar Berning was also a signatory of Triano.

Political Papalism was always a tricky topic to discuss among Lutheran Christians; when it comes to influencing foreign and domestic policies, the Pope in Vatica had nowhere near the pull it once had during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period. At best, His Holiness could give a few suggestions and send some letters in protest. But due to the very fact that the Lutheran Reformation was started because of the corruption and incompetence in the Papacy, you would find very few Lutherans who give a rat's ass about the Pope.

Berning himself was perhaps the most dour-looking politician in all of Berun; he regarded me as though I was the one that invaded the Rhineland. Upon learning his personal animosity towards the Imperial High Command, I could understand why he was so wary around me. My image was paraded across Germania as a prize horse during the dictatorship; each victory I earned was used to reinforce Rudensdorf's regime before its eventual collapse. In a way, I was just as disappointed as he was, hearing my status was used in such a manner.

Finally, the Deutsche Demokratische Partei under Heimal Schlage, once the smallest in the Big Three, was now quickly becoming the most dominant. If the National Liberal Party was anything like the big-tent Liberal Democratic Party in Japan during my old life, then the DDP was the liberal-conservative wing. The more left-wing members had already split off from the party and joined the SPD, pushing the party closer to the centre-left on the spectrum. Schlage had given passionate speeches in the past about his plans to marry classical liberal principles with social progressive ideas. In other words, he was a bit like a nerd discussing his favorite anime crossover.

That wasn't to say that I entirely disagreed with his ambitions. After all, I wanted to be part of this party.

Before my arrival, party recruitment was primarily targeted towards liberal professors, theologians, teachers, university lecturers, etc. Basically well-educated middle-class people -my kind of people- and, graciously enough, we received party membership among executives and civil servants, industrialists, and Judean liberals. Lots and lots of Judean liberals. When I looked over the polling statistics, more Judeans voted for the DDP than any other party.

It's a small wonder why Visha had told me the Germanian Democratic Party was referred to as a "party of Judeans and professors" among conservative circles, especially among White Russy exiles. An attitude she seemed to share with great fear. I could understand her worries: in spite of the usual anti-Semitic conspiratorial drivel, the Judean demographic contained a number of wealthy and intelligent patrons who would no doubt boost the DDP's influence. Our ascent would surely be at the expense of the conservative bloc whom the Whites supported, weakening them and leaving them vulnerable. Given how violent the opposition was growing, Visha must have feared for her relatives' safety now that she was part of the DDP. With any hope, my efforts to woo the conservatives to our side would help allay her worries.

Being the voice and the face of the Republican movement saw the ranks of the Germanian Democratic Party swell and although Schlage expected me to draw in more numbers, he was completely taken aback by the sheer flood of voters and new party members flocking to our banner. As I busied myself with advancing the party agenda, I placed Visha in charge of running background checks on Freikorps Degurechaff - Drachen now.

Even in the new republic, the dragon was still the national animal of Germania.

Speaking of the Freikorps, Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold was a coalition of paramilitaries dedicated to protecting the new Republic against the Red Front and the SA. The Blacks, Reds, Golds were the organised protectors of the Zentrum, SPD, and DDP respectively, adopting the name of the tricolor flag of the Germanian Republic. My men were integrated into the ranks of the Golds though they much preferred to maintain their own identity.

Although by far the largest of the significant paramilitaries, their strength numbering well over a million, their actual power projection was limited. Unlike the street-violent Sturmabteilung or the guerilla-inclined Roterfrontkampferbund, they were barely armed, constrained to handguns and revolvers; adhering to a doctrine of "nonviolent" protection. In other words, they were nothing more than glorified bodyguards. A strange example of implemented idealism for the current day and age, in a paramilitary outfit as well. I just hoped my subordinates could adjust to the sudden change.

"I look like a milkman." Koenig sighed. Oh, how he wished his leader would allow them to wear the old Imperial uniforms.

Instead of fieldgrau, the uniforms were a pale beige color. It was quite plain and hideous to look at, with visor caps that were as soft and mushy as bread dough. Putting it on made him feel like a discount version of the Cheka or the NKVD.

He wasn't alone with the sentiment among his fellow Freikorps officers, though; Neumann let out a big-bellied laugh.

"You heard what Tanya said. Would you rather dress up as a middle schooler? Rohr is currently recruiting!"

Koenig shivered as did Weiss and Visha. The National Vanguardists had a… bizarre fashion sense when it came to party uniforms. Everyone borrowed clothes from school once in a while but those Nazi brownshirts took it too far.

But before anyone could continue the conversation, the door opened revealing the most important person in all of their adult lives. She wasn't alone, however, due to how short Tanya was compared to the woman behind her. Koenig fought hard to keep his eyes off the new girl's breasts. He had a fiance, dammit! Keep it together, Koenig!

"At ease, everyone," Tanya said, before moving aside to introduce the young woman. "This is Elena Muller, the newest member of our movement. Thank you, Visha, for spreading the message."

To his left, Visha blushed hard as if she had proposed. Koenig had a feeling the White Russy became a bit…queer to cope with the loss of the Great War. Then again, so did many of his friends and comrades who went to the nightclubs in Berun.

"To summarize her contributions to the Fatherland, Elena collaborated with Rudensdorf's regime as one of his specialist agents. She led an intelligence ring to protect the Home Front from fifth-column spies and traitors."

The smile on Elena's face could not be brighter. Quite frankly, it scared Koenig. Knowing what skills the Major wanted in her followers, leading a network of informants sounded the least notable of her talents.

"She'll be our eyes and ears in this crusade against extremism. It's not enough to take the fight to our enemies; we have to plan for their every move and course of action." Tanya explained, "If you believe that we lack enough insight to guarantee the protection of our party, do not hesitate to ask her for additional assistance."

All four of them nodded quickly.

"I would love to stay and discuss our future together but I have a meeting with Herr Goering so I'll leave you five to get to know each other better."

No sooner did their leader leave than Elena dropped the smiling act and approached the officers with as much grace as a starving lioness on the hunt.

"Have we succeeded?" She demands to know.

It was Weiss who spoke up first.

"Succeeded in acquiring more men and material? Yes. We just need to take the fight to the Kozis."

"But is it enough to take the throne?"

The intensity of her gaze was fierce. While Tanya's eyes were full of fire and rage as deep as the ocean, Elena's were a cold steel blade sharpened on a whetstone. Weiss quickly averted his gaze, clearly wanting his brethren to speak up.

"Possibly." Koenig felt the shivers flow up his spine when the new girl turned her head to face him, "We can remove Lutzebuerg and Rohr from the equation permanently but as for the Reichstag-"

"The Freikorp commanders in the Reichsbanner have collaborated with our leader well enough," Visha interrupted, speaking with a lot more authority in her voice than usual, "But their doubtful integrity and uncertain loyalty towards Tanya's vision of Germania makes further cooperation untenable - we need these men on our side - but once our leader's position in Berun is secured, they will have to be removed from command structure to guarantee a safe transition of power."

Elena pulled out a pen and notepad, signaling the request for names, which Visha and Neumann were all too diligent to give. Altogether, the number was up to 26. 26 individuals in the Reichsbanner whose discretion in saving the Empire remains unsatisfactory. The face Elena gave to Visha was really awkward to discern - were they…?

Koenig quickly banished those dirty assumptions. They weren't a couple. They were roommates. Nothing more.

"When will Tanya give us the order?" Elena asked, putting away her notebook.

"She has not given an exact date yet, hence why you are here…" Neumann shrugged, "But she wants us to be punctual nonetheless so we have plenty of time to tie up loose ends."

I may have been half-lying to my subordinates about that meeting with the Great War fighter ace. It was still going to occur, just later down the line, as I had a more immediate concern to deal with. After some time convincing Schlage to allow me to bring up this issue directly to the Secretary General, he used his political channels in the Reichstag to secure me an appointment with General Lergen. The General was a good man with strong morals and great intelligence, I must not register his involvement on an emotional scale.

"General Lergen," I greeted him with a warm smile, "Congratulations on your promotion."

Although a bit too young for the position, being in charge of all communications between the Reichswehr and the Minister of Defence, Lergen had the confidence and the technical skills to serve admirably. Combined with his sharp appearance, he was a lady's dream husband. However, the lack of a ring on his finger indicated he was married to the job more than anything.

"Likewise, Miss Degurechaff, considering your actions in Magyarorszag and Daneland."

"The people still needed me. I am not one who is so easily discarded by society just because the war is over." I replied, silently dreading where this conversation would end up, my true feelings hidden under a straight but pleasant veneer.

"Your radio messages are also very comforting. I am almost ashamed for underestimating your talents."

"Not all battles can be won with the gun and bayonet. Not all wars can be silenced with an artillery barrage." I shrugged, "This will be my greatest challenge yet."

"Yes, indeed. Though I believe that is not why you insist on meeting me."

"Indeed." My face turned serious. This would be the most important conversation in his career as Secretary General. "Have you heard about the 'Stab in the Back'? Are you familiar with the popular sentiment among right wing and conservative rhetoric?"

"Yes. I am." Lergen answered slowly, his features turning weary. "It is not difficult to notice."

"So you are aware of the contents of this myth - how the 'Stab-in-the-Back' coincides with a recent increase of anti-semitic crimes happening across Central Europe?"

"Not to its full extent, but I also noticed the trend."

"Then you know how dangerous this idea is? How this is leading to a rise of murder, vandalism, and violence against the Judean population in Germania and in the post-Imperial states?"

"It is certainly a reason why there is social and political instability in the Republic. Is there a reason why you approached me on this topic?"

Finally, we get to it. It hurts me to say this but he must know what I plan to do to stop the crisis from spilling out of control.

"General Lergen." I said with the utmost authority I could muster. "I want to say this in the most unambiguous terms possible: Germania was not betrayed by any substantial margin by one - or any - of the ethnic minorities in the Empire. I am conducting a private investigation into the conspiracy theorists perpetrating the insidious lie to preserve the honor and integrity of the nation."

Lergen turned pale. He must have thought I was accusing him of being a slanderer!

"We both served our fatherland with great integrity and ability throughout the Great War and although we could influence several decisions, we could not change the outcome of the war entirely. We lost on the grounds of a collapsing homefront due to a suffocated economy and the overwhelming power of the opposition. I am not accusing you of treason or promoting civil strife, but if you are withholding vital information as to how and why this 'Stab-in-the-Back' myth is being promoted by the Junkers and the officer corps, I will have no choice but to request Chancellor Herimann or his successor that you be removed from all government and military postings."

Now he looked extremely uncomfortable in his chair. His career depended on a squeaky-clean reputation, no doubt he'd underestimated the appeal of the myth. To his sharp mind, the truth was so obvious that it was not worth the time to debunk. Lergen certainly regretted it now.

"Field Marshal Rudensdorf and Zettour -" he began.

"Yes. I already know it is their names attached to this falsehood that gives it credibility. I respect them as war heroes but their association with this myth cannot be ignored. General Lergen, I need to know who else is in on this insidious messaging." I quickly cut in.

This is going nowhere fast. He must have had influential backers who landed him this position and who would drag his name through the mud in one final gasp of petty revenge once this charade was revealed. I would need to protect him from the worst of the fallout once my investigation had been concluded.

Or perhaps I need to whistleblow early and force the culprits to reveal themselves. I already have access to the radio and some of the only widely read newspapers in the country. Yes, I should do that. It would be my credentials against Rudensdorf's and Zettour's.

"I see what must be done now." I smiled. "Worry not, General Lergen, we will be seeing each other very often in the future."

Chapter Seven: Reichswehr: Black Dragon

Wilhelm Heinrich Goering was a professional flatterer; he knew how and when to give praise at a moment's notice. In the corporate world, such a sycophantic attitude would land him somewhere nicely along the corporate ladder as some CEO's favorite pet. But behind Goering's stellar performance as a fighter ace and handsome veneer was a dangerous, dangerous man. As far as I could remember from my books in Japan, he was the Fuhrer's Number Two. You didn't reach a position of power like that in the treacherous landscape of a Fascist dictatorship just by being a pretty face.

I would need to match him wit for wit.

So far, he held the advantage: the meeting was taking place at a castle in Bavaria, his "home field." It looked like something ripped straight out of a Disney film: pure white stones with blue-tipped towers, a massive gate flanked by banners of a Junker family's heraldry. Of course, Goering was not a member of the nobility, rather he had been sent here as a representative for the broad coalition of Junkers and industrialists which made up the conservative bloc, but he sure as hell acted like one. Still, the smile on his face was infectious.

"Argent Silver! I am so glad you could make it." He leaned down to kiss my free hand.

Gah!

Wass everyone going to be kissing my hand?! This should be illegal! He was initially about to reach over to grab my attache but I quickly jerked it away. Goering didn't look offended at all, choosing to move on instead.

"I hope you enjoyed the scenery on the way here. The fresh air does wonders in restoring the vigor and health of the body."

That I could agree with.

"Compared to the smoke and artillery guns, this is heaven on earth." I answered as he led me deeper into the castle. To my surprise, it was filled with various bigwigs and many socialites too; from aristocrats to business magnates, and even a celebrity or two.

"Am I intruding on a special event?" I asked.

"Argent Silver, YOU are the special event!" Goering gave a small laugh. "Your actions in defending our countrymen against the Dacians and the Legadonians were spectacular! Why, I had even quit my job at Fokker in order to join the fight in Daneland, but the war was already over by the time I got to Juteland! If only the Great War had been as easy."

"If it were an easy war, we wouldn't have fought in it."

"Indeed! We Germanians balk at easy victories. You know how the saying goes: Viel Feind -"

"Viel Ehr." I finished much to my chagrin. This is the attitude that got my original nation nuked twice by the Americans. To live to fight is a fast track to dying early.

Compared to the realities of encroaching hyperinflation, the elites made idle talk about their companies' finances and complained about the inaction of the SPD-led government. But as soon as they saw my face, the topic of the room shifted towards me and only me. Goering, thanks to his massive ego, made sure to be in every picture taken of me.

There was even a reporter from the DNVP present who had asked for an interview. An opportunity that I had to postpone for later.

Finally, we ended up in a room reserved for our meeting. Several aides brought dishes of the highest quality and wine of the finest Germanian vintage. Hell, I would give concessions to the Junkers just on the good hospitality alone. They clearly recognized my role in the Weimar Republic. I was the last credible voice that the conservatives and militarists had.

"Now, I have been made aware that you sought out a meeting with the conservative coalition to discuss the future of the Republic." Goering asks.

"Yes." I nodded, "I wanted to talk about the reparations."

"Indeed, the socialist traitors are content in ripping the honest Germanian citizen of his -"

"Herr Goering. You have clearly mistaken my stance. I fully endorse the government action to pay off the war debt the Francois and the Albish have forced upon us."

The former fighter ace nearly choked on the wine he was given, utterly astonished at my words.

"What? You seriously don't mean -"

I held up my hand.

"This is serious. The government needs money. Money that the Junkers and the industrialists have. I am here to implore the conservative right to also invest in government bonds. By buying these federal bonds, they will help stabilize the economy and restore public confidence in the republic."

"The republic was forced upon us!" Goering was just below the level of shouting. "No one in Germania asked to be Francois puppets!"

"Better a puppet than a slave." I retorted, "For the former can cut his strings while the latter would need to break his chains. Since these conservative patriots would sooner cede Lothiern and the Rhineland to Parisee than to accept the new status quo, I would have to ask who the real traitor to Germania is."

"I can't believe that you would side with the Judean scum and those socialist traitors! You-you-!"

"Relax, Herr Goering. Drink some water and calm down. We're both veterans of the Great War. I serve the Fatherland, whether it is a monarchy or a republic is completely irrelevant. All I seek is to protect my home from Bolshevik scum."

That was enough to calm him down. It would do me no good if the representative walked out on me. Not when so much was at stake.

"They betrayed our country. Our Fatherland…"

Pulling up my briefcase, I revealed its contents. It was the same report I had given to Stromming albeit with a few revisions after my experience here in Germania. I slid it over to Goering for him to read.

"If this sounds familiar to you, it is because it is. The SPD of Daneland didn't give this to me, it was I who came to them with the truth. If you find any inconsistencies with my counterargument with the 'Stab-in-the-Back,' I welcome you to write a rebuttal to disprove my points. Then we can have a proper debate on the Reichstag floor instead of settling a disagreement through blood."

It was highly amusing to watch the Five Stages of Grief flash before the veteran's face. He was trying so desperately to say I was wrong and misinformed, but the numbers do not lie.

"Our armies are the greatest in the world." Goering still clung to that poison like a drug addict. "We subdued the Legadonians, we captured Parisee, we pushed back against the Red horde, the Illdoans were humiliated and even with the Albish and Americans against us, we did not crumble."

"We were the greatest army in the world," I replied, "But that was before four and a half million men of the Fatherland perished after eight long years of attrition. With it, the valuable experience was gone. In the first year of the war, over 40% of the trained, experienced personnel were lost. By the second year, that number rose to 60%. By the fourth year, over 80% of the corporals, sergeants, and captains had to be replaced. If we were the greatest army in the world, why did we have to resort to allowing 16-year-olds into service?"

"It's because the ethnic minorities of the Empire did not contribute to the war effort! The Judeans were draft dodgers, for God's sake!"

"Interesting accusation. How many draft dodgers did you identify? Did you compare the numbers to how many were called into service? If it was such a serious issue, how come I was not notified? I did several recruitment ads during my tenure in the Imperial Mage Corps; the Kaiser should have sent me on a domestic tour to rally popular support."

The fighter ace seemed to push through that retort. "Our industrial base was unmatched in the world. We had the most advanced weaponry possible to give to our armed forces."

"You're right. Our industrial capacity was the largest in Europe. But against half of the world? Against the combined weight of the Unified States, the Albish Commonwealth, and the Russy Federation? No, we could not have outproduced them. Time was against us and we were running out of valuable metals needed for the factories. One V-1 missile is still one missile. Our bombers could not touch the American heartland while our cities remained vulnerable to theirs."

"Our leadership is superior to theirs and our mages are the best in the world. Your existence proves it."

"Our enemies aren't idiots. They are just as intelligent and fallible as you and me. It takes 15,000 men to train a major general; more than enough to get our opponents to adapt to new technologies and strategies to defeat us. We were simply outmatched in the long run. Rudensdorf is a good man and a great commander but even he could not have fought a war on four fronts. Even I could not take on the entire planet and win. I was still only one person among many in the meatgrinder of the Great War."

"We could still win!" Goering shot up from his seat. It was almost adorable seeing him try to grasp at straws to cement his beliefs as reality.

"How?" I demanded. "How?! This isn't the age of the glorious cavalry charges. This is an era of modern war! We could not have won through decisive victories alone; victory was granted to whoever could produce more guns and butter than the rest. You're a brilliant fighter ace in your own right, but even you cannot shoot down every plane our enemies throw at you. I've had my fair share of near-death experiences, and I'm sure you have too."

Goering settled back down in his chair but before he could open his mouth again, I once again held my hand up to silence his great maw.

"Herr Goering, I believe we are getting off-topic from the original purpose of this meeting," I said, returning to my seat. "Once again, for the safety of our country and to preserve what integrity it has left, the Junkers and the industrial magnates need to financially support the government; no time to be frugal."

"What's in it for us?" Goering demanded.

"Cease your hostility; let me remind you that the people you represent have no real friends in the Reichstag. The Communists plot to seize their wealth and redistribute it and the National Vanguardists plot to do the same. You could either continue to negotiate with me or you could have an audience with Rohr or Lutzebuerg."

That shut him up real quick, perhaps he could finally act like a reasonable person and not some faux noble with a fanboy streak. The man went deep into thought, brows furrowed and hand on his chin as though deliberating on something, before he answered.

"...the Rhineland is plagued by Bolshevik rhetoric. Thanks to its status as a demilitarized zone, the communists have entrenched themselves like ticks, disrupting production with their talks of a workers' revolution." Goering huffed, "Westphalia is no better."

"Why haven't the Reichswehr suppressed these communist groups?" I raised an eyebrow.

"God only knows. Believe me, I had a similar question. I hate the Treaty of Triano but even I know that there's a clause that would at least allow us to use the army to suppress revolts in that region."

"Is that their only concern?"

"Essentially. My clients have massive investments and properties in the Rhineland they would like to see liberated. Drive the Reds out, break some fingers, and the Weimar Republic may just earn enough goodwill among the conservatives to gain their support."

"I'm glad we're on the same page. However, there's also this attitude towards Triano that needs to be adjusted."

Goering grunted in acknowledgement.

"The Germanian National People's Party are three things: monarchist, anti-semitic, and anti-parliamentarian," I listed out the problems. "Tell the party leader, Heinrich Class, that in return for stopping all publications of the Stab-in-the-Back myth and replacing that lie with my reports, I can organize a referendum on his behalf on the question of a royal restoration."

The former fighter ace seemed to smile.

"And if he refuses?"

"Then tell him that I will meet with him in person and that would be the only warning I would give. Class is not the only person who thinks this country is infested with vermin."

The reporter's name was Johannis Stricher and he was the first man to greet me as soon as I exited the room. He looked half a decade older than Visha yet was just as enamored basking in my presence. Whether or not Stricher was a newbie reporter, he'd struck gold with the chance to interview me. The feeling was also mutual.

What better way to tear down an entire party than to humiliate it in its own domain?

After secluding ourselves into another corner of the castle to avoid any unnecessary distractions from the conservative crowd, I found myself across the table from Stricher. Unlike Goering's table, the refreshments and snacks were more humble yet no less delicious: pineapples, apple cider, and fresh cheese.

The reporter began, "Fraulein von Degurechaff, I appreciate you giving your time. Our readers are eager to hear your thoughts on the events of the Great War. Some claim that certain traitorous factions, including individuals of a particular background and of questionable morals, were responsible for Germania's defeat. What are your insights on this matter?"

I looked at him with a calm but stern glance.

"The narrative of blaming a specific group for the nation's defeat is erroneous. The Great War was a complex conflict with multifaceted reasons for its outcome. Attempts to attribute it solely to any particular community are misguided and undermine the national unity necessary for our country's progress. Why, have you not seen what the government of Daneland has published?"

He shifted uneasily, clearly attempting to steer the conversation toward more divisive rhetoric. "I have certainly read over what the Danish Social Democrats have said; it was an intriguing read. But surely, there were elements within certain communities that didn't align with the nation's interests. How do you address that?"

I can feel my blood boiling. How many times do I have to address this?

"Every society comprises individuals with diverse perspectives. It's critical to make decisions beyond blanket judgments. Our focus should be on fostering unity and cooperation among all citizens for the betterment of our nation. Blaming particular groups only hampers progress and perpetuates dangerous divisions. I was there on the frontlines; we were defeated by the Allied Powers. There was no secret Judean cabal orchestrating our downfall. We were simply outmatched."

Before Stricher could open his mouth to spew more idiotic nonsense, I held up my hand to get him to cease.

"Moreover, the rise of anti-Semitism is a concerning trend that must be addressed and opposed in all directions. Prejudice against any group, based on religion or ethnicity, has no place in a

modern, enlightened society. We must strive to educate and build bridges rather than succumb to baseless hatred. If we don't, Germania will be weaker in the face of Francois imperialism."

"I cannot tolerate this notion any longer," I added, "For a party that is for the patriots and the Fatherland, it is most insulting for it to find excuses to cover up the defeat in the Great War. If Herr Class truly loves his country, he would identify the real problems that have seen our nation defeated and partitioned by the Francois Republic and introduce real solutions. Instead of acting like a child, finding ghosts where there are none, like a false shepherd."

The interview concluded without much further fanfare. Each one of my responses to his next series of questions left him more and more baffled until the very end. I knew that challenging such entrenched beliefs required a delicate approach, but sometimes, the direct response is the most effective response.

I certainly was looking forward to how Stricher would try to twist my words in the next set of DNVP newspapers.

If the Reichsbanner were to become a formidable force in defending the Germanian Republic, they would need more than just pistols. Although the 100,000-strong Reichswehr could theoretically put down a large revolt, in the four months since my meeting with Goering, the Communists had acquired up to 500,000 fighters while membership in the SA had reached one million. It fell upon us to assist the federal army in dismantling these violent movements. It was an unfortunate reality, but Herr Schlage and his colleagues' vision for a nonviolent defence force was simply untenable. We needed to champion peace but be capable of violence, or otherwise be rendered toothless and vulnerable.

Training was a straightforward affair. Many if not all of the men of the Reichsbanner were veterans of the Great War so I didn't have to start from the basics. However, although we would be heading towards the Rhineland, it wouldn't be trench warfare again. No. It would be urban street fighting; we would have to conquer the living room before advancing into the kitchen and the attic.

The rifle is a dear friend but it is too cumbersome to be used in tight spaces. It would be far more useful to be assigned to snipers and designated marksmen. No doubt the Communists had spent a significant amount of time militarizing their trade unions into a coherent guerrilla force. We'd need superior firepower to flush them out of their nests.

Revolvers and handguns are good weapons in close-quarter combat and axes, bludgeons, and the spade have proven their worth in the trenches. In such an environment, those tools would be invaluable in breaking down the doors to allow my units to rush in with their small arms drawn.

Discipline was key, however, and even though we were not in the army, it would ruin our PR standing with the voter base if my followers devolved into a mob burning and looting their way across western Germania. Thankfully, Koenig, Weiss, and Neumann made terrifying drill instructors in a pinch, drilling into our volunteers' heads that this was not some adventure or mere game but their one and only chance to secure public order and maintain freedom and liberty for their homeland.

In establishing ourselves as trainers, it seemed as though a bond had begun to grow. I'd noticed more and more of the Reichsbanner troopers, from the standard members to the officers, asking advice from both me and my subordinates on various topics; from combat tips to even patrol routines and command decisions. It was good to see the men beginning to see us as one of them; camaraderie and trust were important in any armed force.

Speaking of her subordinates; for months on end, Weiss had been requesting that he be able to wear the color black for his uniform instead of the "hideous" beige garb. Humoring him, I allowed him to craft his own if he could manage to find a tailor. Since his request was beyond the normal budgetary constraints, Weiss would need to pay out of his own pocket; a restriction that didn't seem to faze him one bit. I could sympathize with his enthusiasm; these pale brown uniforms were a blank canvas for an artistic mind to paint over.

If my subordinates wanted to paint it black, who was I to refuse? As long as identifications remained consistent and visible.

A knock on my door shook me out of my thoughts. It opened to reveal Visha with a curious smile on her face.

"Herr Larsen wishes to talk with you, Tanya."

Larsen? Why was he here? And how did he find me?

If Daneland needed my aid again, it better be an actual emergency. I expect the entire Legadonian army to be on the march right now.

What kind of business does a Dane, a Czech, and a Magyar have in Germania? Arms trafficking.

Across six trucks belonging to Skoda Works were wooden crates and barrels labelled as "Butter", "Bread", and "Beer". Their contents were rifles, machine pistols, submachine guns, light and heavy machine guns, stick grenades, ammunition bayonets, and even computation orbs and trench guns.

Made in the Czech-Slovak State. There was enough war material here to outfit an entire battalion.

I looked up at Larsen with a quizzical face. I hadn't ordered any of these at all! Who gave them the idea in the first place?

"You helped us save our country." Larsen lit a cigar as if this whole encounter was a night in a beer hall. "It is time we help you save yours. The Prime Minister sends his regards."

"The Royal Regent sends his regards." The Magyar representative bowed.

"The President also sends his regards." The Czech followed suit.

"Does President Mazarik know that such an act would violate his nation's friendship with the Francois Republic?" I had to know that man's reasoning. Wasn't he the one who called for Czech independence?

"Pardon my manners, Argent Silver, I should have introduced myself first. I am Edurard Henlein, and yes, he does know." Henlein answered with a sly smile. "The Francois are so desperate to keep the Little Entente alive that even if they catch wind of this, they'll overlook it in order to preserve any semblance of unity."

"Will this gratitude be offered only once or will we be breaking open the breadbox in a routine?"

It was the Magyar who spoke up, Felix Czalzi, with a devilish smirk. "Once, but we can go through this arrangement two or three more times. Though I suspect, by then, you won't need to rely on government handouts."

He was not wrong. The Treaty of Triano was inherently untenable. The Germany back in my old life had already begun violating it the moment the ink had dried on that piece of paper. General Secretary Lergen must already be collaborating with the Minister of Defence, Adolf von Hammerstein, in rebuilding the Reichswehr in secret.

Given how unnerved Lergen was in my recent encounter with him, he doesn't seem privy to sharing details. He already has too much on his plate. First, the secret armament and now the conspiracy theory he would need to root out.

All the more reason I would need to ensure public safety is restored on the streets.

I thanked the representatives for their time and got to business organizing these "donations" to be given to my men. That solved one problem but I would still need to set up a logistics chain to ensure a steady stream of ammunition for the guns. 100 bullets for a bolt action rifle may seem like a lot but in a prolonged firefight, it would not be enough to squeak out a victory.

Still, I took the men into my office to pry a little more information out of them. Apparently, Daneland and Magyarorszag had purchased several shipments of small arms to be used for

their own armies and decided it was cheap to secure a transportation route through Germania. That was the official line, anyway. Stromming and Horvath really did not care about being caught it seems; giving me a small mountain of armaments and a month's worth of ammunition.

The mask had finally slipped and now the Germanian Republic was in greater danger than ever. The insidious demon, Tanya von Degurechaff, despite her soft words and angelic appearance, had begun to corrupt the Reichsbanner from within and set her plans for a future that could not be more disturbing for the Progressive Bloc - at least to Zentrum.

Berning was right not to trust Argent Silver. The veteran party chairman of Zentrum was right to protest and denounce her entry into the DDP. Her status and messages were simply too good to be true.

Deep in the heart of the Reichspräsidentenpalais, under every layer of security afforded, Berning paced back and forth before the leaders of the Progressive Bloc. His face was both wroth and fearful at the prospects of Tanya's latest agenda. Sure, he was thankful that she had made the conservatives more amicable in their negotiations, allowing for a more stable, and hopefully secure, election in the coming November. Voting day was just around the corner.

But now that Argent Silver was amassing an army of ideological fanatics, his concerns could no longer be buried.

"She needs to be stopped. Once and for all." Berning bemoaned, turning to face his political allies. "What were you thinking, Herr Schlage? Allowing her to amass so much gravitas?"

Heimal Schlage rubbed his own eyes underneath his glasses, hoping to wipe away the shame. In hindsight, he should not have allowed her to act with so much autonomy. But with her political acumen, her insight into economics, and her ability to rally men at the snap of her fingers, it was too easy to assign more responsibilities, whatever he could think of, to the war hero. She had brought nothing but success. Too much success. It was already well into August and Tanya had practically guaranteed a dominant coalition government.

But at what cost to the moderates?

President Erbel was turning pale by the second.

"You don't mean to…assassinate her?" He asked sheepishly.

"We still have the Reichswehr. We can use it to crush the Argent Silver and her Black Army." Chancellor Herimann suggests, "Let's wait for her to bleed herself dry against the Reds and the Brownshirts."

"She's a decorated war hero." Schlage protested.

"She's gaining too much influence over the Reichsbanner; more and more of our units no longer follow our directives. They approach Degurechaff and her subordinates for approval instead of us. We must take action before she launches a putsch with our own men!"

"Even so, who can guarantee that the Reichswehr won't join such a putsch? The regular army would worship her as a goddess!"

The radio messages, the campaign speeches, the political ads - those were not her words. Degurechaff was the perfect political chameleon, being able to unite the far-right with the moderate left. Her smile was too wide, her joy too infectious, her advice on economic matters too helpful, but Berning knew better; there were few actors in the world that could pull off the same charade. The young woman's heart belongs in the Empire, no doubt about it.

"We'll resort to assassination if all other options fail," Berning stated the words and they tasted like poison in his mouth. He hated the concept of murdering a fellow Papalist, but the future of Germania had to be free from her authoritarian, militarist streak.

Such an act would be the highest betrayal ever done to the Fatherland; to kill its greatest soldier. But history would vindicate him.

Not another dictator. Not another Kulturkampf. Not another Sophist in Berun.

"We have to send her away, far away, from the capital." The Zentrum leader continued, "Keep her as far away from the center of politics and we will be able to work on dismantling her power base. By the time she returns, the Argent Silver will be unable to remove the safeguards protecting the democratic process."

"Where do we send her?" Schlage asks.

"Yugoslavia." Chancellor Herimann spoke up after a moment of deliberation. "The Bolsheviks have made their way to Beograd, forming a Red Front to oppose the monarchy. Degurechaff would not resist the scent of communist blood."

"It's our best option." President Erbel sighs, "Lothiern is too stable, Daneland has already been helped by her, Pullska and Magyarozag would only feed her ambitions; quite frankly, there's nothing to do in the Czech-Slovak State or Osterry."

"We'll have to contact our friends in Beograd to entice Degurechaff to come over. But we have to do it on separate occasions to prevent her from catching on; she is far too cunning for her own good." Berning stated.

"What happens if she cleans up Yugoslavia too early?" Schlage said.

"Unlikely, the kingdom is a melting pot of ethnicities. Various separatist groups are threatening to give the nation its own version of Trianofication. She'll be occupied for a long time."

Chapter Eight - Killing Time in Kassel

"Your main contact will meet you in Kassel; go through Konigstrasse. He will be inside the church of St. Martinese; 2nd row on the left, you cannot miss him." I remembered Elena saying this before I put on my disguise and rode a train to Hessen. "He is my second cousin, from Bavaria, a police detective. The Bavarian police branch is stretched thin in manpower hence why he has to do some field work in Kassel."

It was amazing how fast Elena could set up a small sting operation on short notice. As soon as I relayed Goering's prerequisite for conservative political support to our PR specialist, she wasted no time contacting her former colleagues in Western Germania and hiring young, unemployed women as informants and pollsters. A cousin who was a police secretary, huh? No wonder the need for public order and safety runs in her veins.

Of course, given how recognizable my face was, I had to put on a disguise to avoid communist thugs from spotting me from a mile away. Normally, under such circumstances, the easiest thing to do was to dye my hair into another color, like red or brown. But since hair dye is a relatively new invention, I would rather not burn my scalp. As such, a different haircut would need to suffice.

Given how I let my hair grow out more now that I was older and out of the military, I went with a Francois braid. No one would dare suspect a Germanian Imperial Revanchist would dare associate with anything that had the word "Francois" in it. I'd not felt so childish yet so clever in a long while.

My partner, who was supposed to be meeting me at the train station, had the cover of being a women's fitness instructor for swimming. Despite turning 18 last month, it still felt scandalous. Then again, no other option seemed better. A math tutor 10 years my senior? Scandalous! A fencing teacher opening the doors of a traditionally male-dominated sport to a young feminist? Scandalous! A music teacher? In this economy where no one could afford such a high-class tutor? Even more scandalous!

Finally, I saw him. He matched the description Elena gave me: blond hair, blue eyes, a nice, clean-shaven face, and tall. Almost two meters.

"Herr Vesars?" I said aloud, playing my role expertly. "I have come to prepare for the Olympic games."

For a few awkward seconds, my contact simply gawked at me as if he had just seen a unicorn. If he had forgotten his lines, I swear…

"I am paying in silver," I whispered harshly, throwing in a wink.

That shook him out of his stunned silence.

"Pardon my manners, Fraulein Gelt, the description did not do your beauty great justice. I am truly honored to have such a woman as my student. It's rare for someone of your sex to have the skills and knowledge to match her angelic face."

For some reason, I had a terrific urge to slap him in the face.

"Let's go. We have another student to meet in St. Martinese," I said, dragging Vesars along, much to his amusement.

"I have to say," he remarked as we made our way through Konigstrasse, "It really is a pleasure meeting you - leading our country out of this mess, the charge against the Bolsheviks, I can already see the Judean capitalist menace in Berun shivering in their boots - gah!"

I couldn't stand it anymore. I didn't even care that we were surrounded by a crowd of tourists, shoppers, vendors, communist spokespersons, or policemen. I immediately turned around, and with the fury of eight years of bloody warfare, I gave a right hook straight onto his groin.

The tall, blond giant crumpled onto the pavement like a house of cards, clutching his family jewels.

"I think you castrated me…" he groaned weakly.

"Good, I'd hate to see your degenerate intelligence and judgment be passed on to any offspring." I pulled him up by his hair and whispered quietly. "What's your real name?"

"Heydryk…Bruno Anna Maria Heydryk…"

"Heydryk." I said through steeled teeth, "If I hear one more of that stupid, treasonous talk about Judean backstabbers, so help me God, I will drag you to the nearest Judean cemetery, find an empty tomb, and bury you in it. Now blink twice if you understand that you are going to scrub your brain clean of the Stab-in-the-Back myth once our business is done here."

Heydryk blinked twice.

"Good. Now get up on your feet and let's go to church already."

My ally became a lot quieter during the journey, aside from a few whimpers.

"Walk it off." I ordered, "Or I will rip it off and throw it into the Black Forest as fertilizer. Just keep a good attitude and I will see you rewarded for your service to the Fatherland."

Finally, we made it into the interior of the Gothic cathedral, and just as Elena had briefed upon, our Bavarian ally was seated in the second row on the left. Unlike those in prayer, he sat still as a statue, unblinking and immovable; he did not even turn his head as we sat next to him.

"Good day, Fraulein Gelt - Herr Vesars." He said, "I am Detective Henning Muller. I am sure you have heard of me before."

"Yes indeed," I answered, Elena as his cousin came to mind.

"You feel alright, Herr Vesars, you look pained." Muller looked over to Heydryk.

"Herr Vesars has made unsavory conduct given his position towards me and other fellow Germanians of the fairer sex." I quickly cut off my ally's words. "I disciplined him in the proper Imperial manner."

"Since he is still alive and not carved up like a ham, I'd say he got off easy." Muller stood up. "Come, let's go to the hotel where we will be staying for the next few nights. Have you brought enough money?"

Heydryk and I both nodded.

"Good, inflation has stabilized enough to allow for predictable pricing. I may not need to report to my superiors for additional funds."

With that initial introduction out of the way, we moved towards Hotel Frederick, named after the famous Warrior-King of the Teutons. Our rooms were on the second floor, together with a balcony; a place for us to rest and review our findings.

As simple as it was to unleash the Reichsbanner onto the communist holdings in Hessen and Westphalia, we simply just cannot break down every single door on every single house. I should've questioned first why we needed a "sting" in the first place since Elena would have already had her informants locating the holdouts for us.

"Care to explain why a Bavarian policeman is this far north?" I asked as we settled around the coffee table. I reached out and plucked the cigarettes out of their mouths before crushing them in my fist.

Like a robot, Muller didn't show a bit of annoyance, unlike Heydryk who looked as if he got slapped on the face. Keep up that sour look and I might just do that.

"Communist activity has gotten bolder in Bavaria, more violent too. Clashes between the Communists and the National Vanguardists are becoming more frequent by the day. Unlike Rohr's stormtroopers, the Spartakus movement is better equipped with guns. My department expects a communist revolution to start in Munich."

"So there's a gun smuggling ring we need to disrupt?"

That explains the excessive violence. Bavaria was Rohr's home turf. The region was extremely conservative, extremely anti-semitic, and extremely Papalist save for a few liberal holdouts in the urban centers.

"Exactly. Locate the caches, identify the ring leaders, and prevent any more shipments through Hesse."

"Should we require the Reichswehr to get involved for protection?" Heydryk inquired.

"It is a good suggestion but it would attract too much attention this early." I replied, "I hear that Minister of Defence von Hammerstein was hesitant to deploy the Reichswehr out of fear of accidentally shooting upon our own citizens. I cannot deploy the Reichsbanner either without explicit approval from the Progressive Bloc. We have to build a case and request a warrant to allow for the ethical removal of political extremism."

"Let us get started then." Heydryk nodded. "Though we might need to create new identities first."

"We'll keep the names just to change to a different profession. Perhaps another police detective and a young, aspiring, policewoman in training?"

I turned to look over to Muller who still remained as stoic as a Hellenic statue.

"Given that the alternative would have this establishment be a target for every communist in a 60 km radius, this might be for the best," he said. "If I told my superiors your real identities, they may overlook this breach of impersonation."

"Then the matter is settled." I got up from my chair. "We will meet back here at 7 p.m. to discuss our findings. Heydryk, if you don't mind, I would like to shadow Muller for the rest of the day."

After a brief staring contest between Muller and Heydryk, the blonde man finally relinquished my decision.

"What shall you have me do? I served in the Reichsmarine, not the military police."

Good point.

"Mingle among the crowd, eavesdrop on rumors or communist speeches, find allies or informants." I suggested, "In fact, why don't you go to a synagogue and talk to the Judeans for some information on our enemy's movement."

With a huff, Heydryk nodded slowly, leaving me satisfied. With his assignments given clear objectives and with enough autonomy for creative interpretation, we all left the hotel to split up and begin our investigation.

"So, as a police detective, what is the first step you do to locate suspects and their illegal cache?" I asked Muller as we walked down the street.

"First, I would review past cases concerning communist activity, which I had already done, it is the usual suspects. If the weapons weren't smuggled through Hessen, it would be through the Rhineland," he answered. "If you have additional intelligence concerning their whereabouts, that would be greatly appreciated."

Elena's informants immediately sprang to mind.

"I believe I do, but I will need to make a phone call first."

"Make it quick," he said, leading me to the nearest phone booth.

Unfortunately, Elena could only tell me so much. Although she had a network of informants already active, it was still too early to produce any results. Any observations so far were surface-level. If I call again tomorrow, she might have something for me. I quickly apologized for wasting her time before hanging up.

It was unbecoming to set unrealistic expectations on subordinates. I'd rather not let such a valuable party asset work herself to death. I already had enough of that corporate culture in one life.

"Sorry for making you wait but I have overestimated the knowledge of my sources," I said, getting out of the phone booth. "We need to reach out to them tomorrow."

"That is alright. We should evacuate regardless," Muller replied, eyeing an armed communist militia on patrol, which was chanting Bolshevik slogans.

As much as I wanted to tell them off, I shouldn't jeopardize our mission's secrecy. Luckily, they didn't notice us as they continued along the path. I felt like they were looking for someone to hang.

For the next few hours, we followed the crowd, asked some questions among the civilians, and even tried to have a meeting with the local communist leadership; though that went nowhere. At least we identified where most communists would gather publicly: a local beer hall at a street corner.

It's where the most militant would congregate and unwind after beating up hapless citizens. Their joyful presence made my blood boil underneath my skin. At least the server was smart enough not to refuse entry to a police detective.

So here I was, at the furthest corner of the beer hall, trying to spot any suspicious movement or overhear some loose words. Detective Muller was conversing with the bar owner, leaving me alone at the table.

"Hey there, miss, have I seen you before today?"

Oh great. I turned my head around and gave my best death glare to whoever approached me.

"No. You have not. You are clearly mistaking me for someone else."

"Ah." The communist thug smiled awkwardly. "You just remind me of that girl with the Francois braid that punched the hell out of that tall guy."

"How fascinating. Now fuck off and leave me to my beer."

The man still had some brains left in him as he meekly turned around and walked back to his table. I couldn't help but feel curious about their conversation.

"You need to work on your romance lines better, Schmidt," one guy said, patting the man on the shoulder.

"You should let a girl drink away her sorrows first," said another. "Obviously she's a scorned lover."

"I wonder what that blonde guy said to her that made a beautiful girl like her so damn mad…" Schmidt grumbled before drinking his mug of beer.

Just then, my attention turned towards Muller, walking back to our table with a slight disappointment on his face. Looks like our first day here is a bust. I hope Heydryk found more success than us. Otherwise, we might be here for the long haul.

We made it back to Hotel Frederick at 7:25 pm as Muller was insistent on resuming his investigation on the streets one more time. The sound of a violin playing on the balcony greeted us first when we made it back to our rooms. The Bavarian detective seemed like he needed some time alone to organize his thoughts and notes.

I made my way to the balcony to investigate the musician and much to my lack of surprise, it was Bruno Heydryk. Elena did not exaggerate when describing his talent for music. He seemed shocked upon seeing me and quickly paused his movements.

Just when Heydryk was about to lay down his bow and strings, I quickly held up my hand.

"I didn't tell you to stop. Our discussions can wait." I remind him, "You can still play the violin."

That made him pleasantly surprised, making Heydryk pick up his instrument again with a smile on his face before playing another piece of Wagner.

Ah, Wagner. The opera composer that every Germanian nationalist could identify by a single note. His themes of a perfect, righteous hero overcoming a sinful world resonated deeply with the conservative, militant Teutonic culture within the Empire. Considering the current state of Germania, the conservatives need a Wagnerite hero now more than ever.

It was a really alarming notion now that I think about it. Rohr seemed to fit that ideal underneath his uncouth drunkenness. I was lucky the SA leader was determined to bring a national revolution to the country, leaving my position for a liberal democracy as the only moderate platform.

"Heydryk," I said, "When I say play the violin, I meant it. I didn't ask for a performance and I don't want you to give me one. Play the violin. Play for yourself. No one is here to judge you - I am not here to judge you."

He didn't look offended, only curious, at my words but he complied nonetheless and continued to play. This time, his music was less…predictable. Instead of another Wagner piece, Heydryck's movements were impromptu yet it reminded me of home.

My real home was in Japan.

His notes were the cherry blossom trees I walked underneath on my way to school; who grew up with me and bloomed the brightest pink colors when I graduated. I suddenly remembered how my parents used to smile at me, how they celebrated my birthdays, and how old they looked when I finally moved out and became a successful salaryman. Hell, I even remember some of my coworkers, those smart enough to remain employed, who always offered to take me to a bar to drink no matter how many times I refused.

I wondered. The day I died on those train tracks. Who told the news at my company? Who told my peers? My parents? Who would take care of them once they grow too old to take care of themselves?

Was I even mourned or was I forgotten? Surely, my company would honor my contributions….

All these questions raced through my head at such speed and repetition that I failed to notice Heydryk stop his performance to approach me.

"Fraulein Gelt…" He said awkwardly, "Are you feeling alright? You are crying. I'm sorry if I offended you in -"

"No. stop. You played beautifully. It was… enlightening."

"Really?" Now Heydryk was really surprised. "My brothers in the Reichsmarine would say otherwise. Not that the Reichsmarine still exists today. They called me a 'Judean Liberal' for having a passion for music."

"Then fuck the Reichsmarine. Don't be like them, even if you want to be." I blurted out. "We can always build another navy. A proper navy for a proper Germania."

"And what kind of Germania would that be?"

"Whatever it needs to be in order to reclaim its legacy."

With the Argent Silver deciding to retire into the night early, it was up to Heydryk to discuss today's findings with Muller. Personally, this was the most bizarre episode in his life. How many men could claim that they have survived getting punched by the famous war hero and later on, manage to make her fall into tears? No one except Heydryk.

That made him smile a bit. His bullies in the navy would be eating their sailor hats right now if it meant they got to see what went down on that balcony.

Knocking on the hotel door, Muller immediately opened up and let him in. To save money, the two men would share a room while Tanya would sleep alone next door. Heydryk immediately began checking the shelves and lamps for any hidden microphones.

"Do not worry, I already checked the room for any bugs," the detective assured him. "We can talk here without any fear of communists eavesdropping on us."

"So what have you discovered with Fraulein Gelt?" Heydryk asked,

"Nothing that we don't already know. If a gun smuggling ring is in Kassel operated by the Reds, they are smart enough not to place it in the most obvious places. Tomorrow, we should head out to investigate the city's train stations to see where they could stowaway the contraband. If we could just acquire one crate of evidence, we could finally get the Reichswehr to intervene," Muller explains.

"Perhaps we should change strategy"

"What do you mean?"

"Convince our associate to drop her act and reveal herself. That would force the reds to reveal their cards since they would be breaking open every crate to arm themselves to capture her."

"Capture?" Muller's eyebrows furrowed, "Not kill?"

"Yes. Capture. Apparently, the Reds have some plan for the war hero."

"Interesting, Where did you get this tip from?"

"I…talked with some Judeans at Kassel Synagogue."

"The Judeans, seriously? You?"

"Yes." Heydryk nodded. "One of their members with a loose tongue had joined the KPD. Came home drunk one night and boasted how capturing the Devil on the Rhine would spark the workers' revolution."

"And you believe them?"

"The Judeans there are DDP voters. They have every reason to fear the Bolsheviks."

"So how should we tell this to her?"

"By telling the truth. Let's be honest here. Fraulein von Degurechaff is looking for any excuse to drop her act."

"But she doesn't have a computational orb. She needs an army. One that she can lead as well as control, if I remember correctly," Muller retorted. "But going back to what you said about those Judeans, they sound like an ideal lead."

"I believe so too. I feel that Fraulein Gelt might have some questions for that Bolshevik." Heydryk nodded in agreement.

"Tomorrow morning after breakfast, we will immediately depart to the synagogue to resume the investigation, is that fine by you?"

"It is fine."

Silence returned to the room before the two men indulged in small talk to pass the time. They traded war stories, debated which brand of chocolate was best, discussed politics, anything to exhaust their restless minds. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

Heydryk watched Muller immediately get up from his seat and approach the door, but not before grabbing his pistol. In this environment, there was no guarantee of a safe evening. Keeping the chain lock attached, Muller opened the door every so slightly.

"Sorry dear customer," said the hotel staff member, "But you don't happen to be with the Argent Silver?"

"Why do you ask?" Muller replied.

"Umm…It's probably easier just to show you."

"Open the door, Detective." came the familiar voice. It was Tanya.

Muller immediately removed the chain lock and opened the door with great fervor.

Both Muller and Heydryk immediately saw their partner in a disheveled manner. Behind her was a brawny man carrying another man tied up over the shoulder. Judging by the color of the attire their new prisoner was wearing, Tanya seemed to have had a run-in with a communist.

"Don't worry. The blood isn't mine, it was theirs," she explained as her benefactor dropped the weakened communist on an empty chair. The hotel valet immediately left the group alone after closing the door.

"Uh, Fraulein Gelt…" Heydryk began.

"Relax, it is a moot point to still use our cover names, Heydryk, and the lobby was empty for the moment," the blonde mage said as she went to the bathroom to wash the bloodstains out of her face. "Also, gentlemen, meet Alan Lichten. He helped me drag the leader of my kidnappers back to this place."

"Good evening." Lichten shook hands with the two Germanians. "I was in the area doing my nightly walks when I heard screaming. I rushed in thinking that there was a rape going on in the alleyway."

"Thank you…for the rescue." Heydryk couldn't fathom how the Argent Silver could be taken advantage of. "Are you from Magyaroszag, perchance?"

"You have an excellent ear, my friend. My Magyar accent still remains. But no. If anyone needed rescuing, it was this poor bastard." The Magyar slapped the balding head of the communist, causing him to wake.

"Demon…demon…" The man muttered repeatedly. "So much blood."

"What's your business here if you are from Magyarorszag?" Muller asked.

"Forming a Freikorps for my Judean brothers here. The Argent Silver's words - it was very inspiring to hear in Pressburg. Together, we can beat both the communists and fascists!"

"How amusing…" Heydryk remarked dryly before his eyes went wide as dinner plates when he saw Tanya exit the bathroom with a knife.

"I should get my hands on a computation orb as soon as possible," she muttered before approaching the frightened communist.

He would've screamed his lungs out if she hadn't pressed the blade deep enough against his skin to draw out blood. Only a few whimpers came out of his mouth.

"I am only going to tell you once, you will answer the questions that Detective Muller will ask you, if not, then my face will be the last time you will ever see." Tanya glared deep into the man's eyes, devoid of detachment or joy.

Meanwhile, Lichten made the right move and backed away from Argent Silver before exiting the room completely.

"Fraulein von Degurechaff." Even Muller was feeling uneasy at the prospect of torture being involved. "This is…unbecoming of my police work - "

"Just ask the damn questions, Detective! I don't have all night." Tanya whispered harshly but it felt like a roar.

Leaving the Bavarian to take over, Heydryk gently guided the Ace of Aces back to her room.

"Care to explain how you ran into a group of communists by yourself? I thought we were supposed to be subtle," he commented.

"I was overconfident and they recognized me when I was walking around the hotel. My cover is blown." She fumed. "That's what I get for underestimating their intelligence. I can't stay here for another day."

"But what about the investigation?"

"We'll have to trust Muller to carry on without me. Not that I can contribute much anyway. I will purchase a train ticket first thing tomorrow."

"Wait - "

"Goodnight Heydryk."

The door was slammed in Heydryk's face. For the first time in his adult life, he felt confused. This wasn't supposed to happen. Instead of returning to Muller, Heydryk went down the stairs to the concierge. Despite the brave face the old man had tried to put up, his eyes betrayed his internal discomfort.

"Good evening, sir." The concierge nodded. "How can I be of assistance?"

"Good evening," Heydryk replied. "Can you tell me what transpired tonight before you saw a Judean carrying a communist inside?"

"The young woman? Gelt - "

"Von Degurechaff."

"Pardon?"

"Tanya von Degurechaff. That's her real identity. She came here to assist in an investigation concerning illegal communist activities."

"Oh." The old man raised an eyebrow, the fear disappearing with naked eagerness. "I had contacted the police about that scene but if I share the good word of the Argent Silver, that might just get them off their asses and beat up some communists."

"Are they cowardly? I would not expect Kassel to have such an ineffective force."

"Cowardly is too harsh…mmmm, too cautious might be more accurate. They're outnumbered and outgunned. But if it really was the Argent Silver that got attacked, now boys in green would have to act to save face."

Heydryk felt a tug of a smile. Of course, that would explain her eagerness to return east.

"Indeed. But they won't have to clean up these streets alone."

Chapter Nine - Pullska Pulling My Leg

"Tanya! There's a letter for you! It's from Generalmajor von Ugar; he wants you to attend his brother's wedding as a guest of honor." Visha looked downright enthusiastic as she handed me an envelope made of the cleanest paper the moment I showed my face in the office. Sure enough, it was from my former classmate. I felt exhausted just by looking at the stamps.

After Osby, I would rather have stayed away from him and his ilk. Even though I had hoped my lecture would steer him away from the destructive rhetoric, I would still prefer a long-distance correspondence rather than anything resembling regular contact.

"By the way, what happened at Kassel? You came back earlier than expected. Even Elena was panicking about how fast you arrived." Visha inquired as I marched back to my desk, grabbed open the letter opener, and ripped apart the envelope.

"We're still working on Goering's request to break the Reds," I stated as I looked over the invitation. "Can you tell Elena to notify her cousin that I will still seek to aid him whenever possible?"

She immediately nodded her head before disappearing from the doorframe to alert our PR manager. Almost immediately, I felt my hand reach to my neck to scratch a ghost injury. That night was too close. Way too close for comfort.

It was very unbecoming of me to take aggressive action without approval from the Big Three, but time was working against us. Every day we delayed further action was another day for the communists to gain Kassel as another Bolshevik stronghold. I needed Schlage to see the reason.

Or… perhaps I was looking at the wrong head of the progressive hydra.

Despite the growing numbers of the Golds, the SPD's Reichsbanner Rot was still the largest paramilitary group in the coalition. If I could get President Erbel or Chancellor Herimann to understand the gravity of the situation in Hessen, we could put down a revolt before it even starts.

Looking back at the wedding invitation, the event was to take place two weeks from now in Warschau. Thinking hard, I tried to remember who led the country. The President of Pullska was Ignatsi Moscic, leader of the Pullska Socialist Party; itself an offshoot and close cousin of the Social Democratic Party in Germania. Chances were, Moscic would have been acquainted with Erbel and Herimann during the Imperial era.

If I could organize a meeting with Moscic and convince him to talk with Erbel, I could finally obtain the authorization needed to command the Reichsbanner Rot to remove communist influence in Hessen. Chances were, Moscic was just as anti-Bolshevik as I was. Any Pule that

wasn't was mostly liked hanging off of streetlamps given how heavy the Russy Federation was breathing down upon the new republic's shoulders.

It was, admittedly, a shaky gambit, but a march into Westphalia and the Rhineland would require the entire Reichsbanner in force, I simply needed more leverage. Hopefully the support of the Pullskan president, and the evidence we could obtain in Hessen of a dangerous communist revolution in the making, would be enough to unleash the Republican loyalists.

Just then, Visha returned with another wide smile on her face. Dependable as always. How lucky I was to have a subordinate such as her.

"Visha, I'll be going away for a while now." I announced, "You'll be in charge during my absence here until I come back from Pullska."

"Really?!" She looked ready to jump towards the moon with that much energy in her feet. "You believe I am ready?"

"Of course you are ready. Did I surround myself with useless mages?"

The brunette quickly shook her head.

"What shall you have me do?"

"Keep to the current course: train up the Reichsbanner, continue the political campaign for our movement, and when the time comes for Muller to request additional manpower, do not hesitate," I instructed. "I know that our superiors are standing idle but once I return, we'll have the mandate to crush the Reds. The election is only coming up in a few months. We need to be on our best behavior for the public."

"Agreed." Visha nodded, before giving me the Roman salute. "For Germania!"

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Huh, what? This? I just…wanted…"

"Stop that. It's improper." I scolded her. Moisture began to glisten around Visha's wide eyes, something which made me almost flinch.

I really need to build immunity to her puppy eyes.

"Don't do that here. We don't do that here. We're working for the Republic. Not Rohr. Understand?"

"I understand." She quickly fled the scene to save face. "I'm sorry!"

I would feel embarrassed too if I pulled a similar stunt towards my political superiors. I know the DDP was right-wing but it's not that far right.

After notifying the rest of my subordinates about my departure to Warschau, I contacted Schlage to let him know that Visha would continue operations in my place. His reaction was rather congratulatory; I supposed it was because of the wedding. Even if it was from strangers I barely knew, getting invited was always a great honor. I suppose I needed a break after Kassel.

On a more productive note, Schlage handed me today's newspaper from Der Tag, the mouthpiece of the Germanian National People's Party, and much to my relief, the anti-semitic rhetoric and the Stab-in-the-Back myth had been subtly replaced with louder calls of a monarchist referendum, national unity, and for the rejection National Vanguardism and Bolshevism. I even saw the portrait of Rudensdorf as their party champion.

"How did you convince them to…drop the subject?" the DDP leader asked.

"It was a quid-pro-quo. They shut up about scapegoating the Judeans and I'll push forward a referendum for their precious monarch." I explained.

"What?! You seriously mean to -"

"Relax, Herr Schlage, I promised that I was going to help them organize a referendum but I did not say I was going to support it."

Schlage grew quiet at my words.

"When that time comes when I am asked to deliver my thoughts on the monarchy, my position will be the rejection of the former Kaiser coming out of retirement in Lothiern."

"That…is good to hear." He struggled hard to smile.

Quite frankly, I could see why he was so anxious. It was a massive risk to partake in: even with my reputation against the Kaiser, there might be just enough Imperial Nostalgia to tip the balance for a majority win for the monarchists.

"Do not worry, once the stability of the Republic has been assured and the democratic coalition has proven its value, the people of Germania will be content with the new status quo." I assured my superior.

Schlage nodded slowly.

"I hope you are correct in that assessment." He replied, taking off his spectacles to absentmindedly wipe at them. "Oh, on the former topic of foreign escapades, once you return from Warschau, would you be willing to explore a matter in Yugoslavia for us? Chancellor Herimann saw value in your advice in seeking deeper trade ties with our neighbors."

Yugoslavia was among the less fortunate of the Imperial successor states. Last I heard, and if my own previous world's history was any indication, the nation would be rife with ethnic and ideological struggle. Despite that, I could see where Chancellor Herimann was coming from: deepening trade ties with the Kingdom would favor Germania by default. To put it simply, as a predominantly agrarian-based nation, there was far more they would need to purchase from us than we from them - a trade deficit on their part would likely develop. And who knows? Perhaps the extra economic stimulus would help bring some stability to the country. Anyhow, acting as a simple diplomatic delegate seemed simple enough, not much could run afoul from such a venture. For now, however, I simply nodded non-committedly.

"I'll consider it."

The trip to Pullska was initially uneventful, aside from bureaucratic red tape put in place thanks to the new Germanian-Pullskan border. That was until the passport inspector, a rather humorous man, quickly sought out my autograph. Of course, that created a cascade effect, which resulted in everyone in my train car asking for my autograph. I signed my name on journals, suitcases, business cards, and literally anything they could shove into my face to sign.

"I can't imagine being the most famous woman in Europe." my fellow passenger commented, who was sitting across from me, once the last fanboy got back to his seat.

I sighed. "It isn't all it's made out to be, Herr…?"

"Foerster. Alan Foerster."

I shook his hand. His grip was hesitant, no doubt he was taken aback by the fact he was sharing the same corner of a random train cart with Argent Silver.

"Well met," I greeted, "What brings you on this journey to the east?"

"Heading to Danzig. I'm a journalist for the DNVP; my friend Stricher, you made quite the impression on him."

"Oh really? How so?" I'm already starting to dread where this conversation was heading.

"That interview was published in the paper yesterday. I read some of it." he scoffed, "We're both veterans of the Great War - why are you so determined to protect the Judeans?"

"Why are you so determined to hate them? As far as I can tell, there are more obvious enemies of Germania gnawing at our borders."

"The Francois, the Illdoans, the Reds, the Legadonian Entene, the Albish, hell, even the Magna Rumelians…" He listed off using his fingers. "We're surrounded."

"Exactly." I nodded.

"I hate them as much as you, as much as anyone here, for denying our country's destiny. But everybody knows that a fortress is most vulnerable on the inside."

"That is why instead of chasing after shadows and letting paranoia govern the garrison, we should unite and stand as one against the onslaught. Let every man, woman, and child who see themselves as true patriots of the Fatherland take up arms against the enemy."

"You think that the Judeans can be patriotic?" He asked, feeling incredulous.

"Half a million Judeans were called up into service during the Great War," I replied. I can just feel my body getting the urge to shut down and sleep. "They fought with valor, they fought with honor, and they fought knowing that they may not live to come home; just like the Magyars, just like the Pules, just like any other ethnic minority in the Empire. If that's not patriotism, then I am a Bolshevik spy."

Now that got him to chuckle.

"Well, when you put it like that, I suppose I can concede to your point."

"Foerster, once you give the Judeans the chance to express their loyalty to Germania, you will not be disappointed by the results. We are all Germanians here. Even with the Empire dissolved, that does not mean its traditions are gone as well. If you keep blaming the Judeans, you will inevitably extend that hate to the Pules, the Magyars, the Dacians, the Bohemians, the Slovaks, etc, etc. It will be like Animal Farm: Everyone is a Germanian but some are more Germanian than others."

"Animal Farm?" Foerster looked slightly confused, "What is that? A book?"

"Nevermind…" I shook my head, "Forget what I just said."

"Right." He grunted, "Say, what about you? Why are you going east? I doubt you got exiled."

"I got invited to a wedding in Warschau though I may find myself involved in other affairs."

"Other affairs?" His eyes shot up, "Oh, the DDP sent you?"

"No, not this time."

"Really? What for?"

"I can't say but the answer is obvious."

"That's fine. I won't pry any further." Foerster nodded in acknowledgment. "Just be sure to let me know once the wedding is over, this sounds like a newsworthy story."

After silence ruled the air between us, the journalist reached into his pocket to pull out a bundle of napkins. They stored sliced apples, slightly brown from contact with the air, and Foerster offered me a slice.

"It's not a gold bar, but consider it my thanks for your service to the Empire." he said.

"Thank you." I smiled before biting into the apple slice.

"You should go to Konigsberg once you're done." He said suddenly, between mouthfuls of apples.

"What for?"

"There's a Germanian you need to seek out. From what I heard, he is causing quite a scene in Pullskan politics."

"How so?"

"Saying the Pules aren't 'real Germanians' and instead Slavic subhumans."

"How lovely…" I groaned, "I take it that the government would be indebted to me if I shut him down?"

Foerster nodded.

"The man is an occultist fetishist, but I think he'll listen to you."

"And why is that?"

"To quote his words, 'Because the Argent Silver is Germania, the warrior maiden incarnate of the Germanic peoples.'"

"Fascinating…" I snorted, "And say I do try to find this man, who is he anyway?"

"Himmler."

"Himmler?"

"Leopold Himmler."

For some reason, I had begun to suspect that this was no ordinary wedding. The wedding was between a young woman marrying a young veteran of the Great War, so showing up in a military uniform was to be expected. But as the only one present not wearing all white, I felt out of place. I probably should've spent the day before finding a white uniform from a tailor as soon as I got off the train, but it was a bit too late now.

The wedding was taking place at the Archcathedral Basilica of St. Johnathan the Baptist; a formidable presence amidst the city's grandeur and a testament to the human passion for art and crafts. The towering structure, adorned with a blend of red brick and white stone, demanded attention with its imposing facade.

I looked at the strategic design of the exterior. The pointed arches, buttresses, and meticulous stone carvings caught my eye; I found myself appreciative of the efficiency and purpose behind each element. Though, the statues of saints and biblical figures adorning the facade drew a cynical smirk out of me. Being X must have felt right at home here with me as his most valuable guest.

Drawing my eyes upward, I saw the twin towers reaching impressive heights as if they were fingers poking at clouds. Topped with spires that pierced the sky, they stood as a testament to the grandiosity of Gothic architecture, a language of elevation and aspiration.

As I stepped inside, I met with the receptionist who looked blessed to be in my presence, but my attention was drawn toward the vastness of the cathedral's interior, its spatial design reflecting the Gothic principles of height and openness. Not even the crowds of people present could take up the amount of space. The stained glass windows, casting vibrant hues upon the surroundings made me pause and stare in awe.

Snap out of it, Tanya. You weren't here to admire the technical skill of the men who built this holy temple.

That said, I could not help but continue to gaze upon the cathedral's grandeur, the altar area richly adorned with intricate carvings and religious depictions. Even the Papalist priest seems to glow considering the special occasion.

"Can you feel it? Fraulein von Degurechaff? The holiness? I see you have brought a rosary."

"Field Marshal Pilsud?" I snapped out of my thoughts upon hearing his voice, before suddenly noticing the rosary which had somehow found itself clutched within my palm. I thought I threw that thing away. "What are you doing here?"

"Same as you: a special guest to a very special day."

"Is there a special reason why you sought me out?" I asked.

At my question, Pilsud looked to his left, to his right, to the man in front of him before turning back to me.

"Yes."

"Let me guess: the Republic is fracturing?"

"Essentially."

"The current leadership is proving itself ineffective and toothless?"

"Exactly."

"You need me to act as a rallying figure to allow for a successor to unite the country?"

"You know it."

Shrugging my shoulders, I let out a huff. This wasn't Daneland; Pullska was a large country in its own right. It would be more difficult to establish a functioning liberal republican government when the land was so used to authoritarian rule under the Kaiser.

"I do plan on speaking to President Moscic concerning the situation in Germania. Have you met the man?"

"Certainly. We were once close friends." His eyes were stormy and bitter as he said those words.

"Once?"

"He is a foolish man for continuing to maintain close relations with the Francois. What happened in Daneland should've been the last straw. Now this country is in danger of hyperinflation and mass unemployment."

"But surely he sees value in maintaining the Little Entente, a collective security against the Russy Federation as well as Germania? I doubt even Parisee would enjoy a communist hegemony over Europe."

Pilsud looked at me with those old stern eyes; the fire inside of him was dim from age but the fire remained nonetheless. It reminded me of my father from my old life when I told him about my job as a corporate HR manager and how one of its responsibilities was firing people.

"You're quite the angel to continue to believe in Moscic. I wish I had your youthful optimism." He finally said. "Do you just want a meeting with the President?"

"Ideally, the meeting would also include his cabinet members from the Socialist Party. The more people I could talk to, the better. It's crucial for what I have planned for Berun." I replied.

"I'll see if I can assist in any way. It might be very beneficial for me as well."

"How so?"

"I have deep grievances against the Francois Republic. Many in the army share the same sentiment. Moscic had long since ignored my calls to leave the Little Entente and seek new alliances. But if you were to remind him what good Francois aid was for Magyaroszag and Daneland, he would have to listen."

I suppose it is a fair point. Defensive alliances only work if the faction leader is committed to the cause of mutual defense. What Parisee did instead was quite frankly an embarrassment.

"How soon can you get the President to agree to a meeting?" I asked.

"Not sure, how long do you plan on staying?"

"Good question." I tapped my chin, "Since I was recommended to explore northern Pullska, I may stay for a week or two. Perhaps a month before I have to return for the election in November."

"Then I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, I would like to introduce you to some of the officers here." The elder commander offered.

"Lead the way." I sighed. I hope Pullskan citizens had more sense than the ones from Daneland.

Now that I think about it, this is the first wedding I have ever attended as an adult. No matter how hard I tried to remember, I couldn't recall a single moment in my previous life as a salaryman where I turned down an invitation, much less receive one in the first place. Company parties would see me in a corner alone, approached by the occasional peer, but never held in long conversions.

This experience was surreal; just going around meeting new and old faces. Autographs were given, pictures with me were taken, and I even had a chance to meet von Ugar's entire family including the youngest brother and his bride. I wished I had worn gloves when the men had bowed their heads to kiss my hand. The groom got lightly slapped by his future bride and he laughed at her awkward joke that I was going to steal him away from her.

As if things weren't strange enough, everyone showered me with praises of my natural beauty. I was cute before, back when I was a child soldier, but being called "beautiful?" That was an unfamiliar word to hear. My long golden locks and sapphire-rich eyes seem to be the ideal feminine look in the current fashion trend. When one of the bridesmaids came up to me to ask about my ideal male suitor, I seemed to shudder at her question.

Her smile was like a cat seeing a mouse stuck in a trap. "Are you, perchance, queer?" The bridesmaid whispered. No doubt an addict to gossip. I retained my silence as I quickly evacuated myself from her presence. Maybe it was a blessing to not be part of such lavish ceremonies.

After the last guest had arrived, the wedding ceremony could finally begin. The priest started us off with a prayer, the couple made their vows, the cake was shared, and speeches were made. Amidst all the idle talk I found myself dragged into one with von Ugar, Pilsud, and some of the Pulleskan officers. My mind wondered what my wedding would look like if it occurred. Who would I even marry?

I would prefer it to be someone at least conventionally good-looking but also someone diligent, loyal, honest, brave to a fault, and honorable. Someone who didn't hesitate to speak her mind.

Someone like Visha.

"Visha." I muttered softely by accident.

"Visha?" Pilsud stopped his remark to repeat her name, "Oh, she is the White Russy Emigre, right? The one who served as your second in command?"

"Uh, yes." Darn it, I should have paid more attention. "She still is. Now she's assisting me organize the Reichsbanner paramilitary in Germania. What of it?"

"With the Russy Federation agitating at the chance of spreading communism westward, it seems prudent that we recruit as many White Russy to our cause as possible." Von Ugar explained.

"There is one notable White Russy still active in East Asia we could try to invite. I believe he still has the loyalty and devotion of the former Tsarist soldiers here." Pilsud commented.

"Interesting. Where in East Asia? Manchuria?" I asked.

"Though there's plenty of White Exiles there, the person I had in mind is a little more west." Pilsud grinned.

"What? In Peking?"

"No, Mongolia."

Honor. Loyalty. Duty. Elena Kaja Mazal Muller had served her Fatherland without hesitation, without restraint, without complaints; asking for nothing in return but recognition. By the Kaiser's will, she worked tirelessly to infiltrate socialist trade unions, separatist movements, and the naive conscientious objector book clubs. While the Empire's bravest sons and daughters fought on the frontlines against the perfidious Francois and Legadonians, she fought a more insidious battle against the arch-traitors, digging through closets full of entire graveyards.

Honor. Loyalty. Duty. Values were being lost by the fallacious promises of a liberal order. When Field Marshal Kurt von Rudersdorf and General Hans von Zettour took over Berun, they formed a military junta to guide the war in a more successful direction. By the Generalissimo's will, Muller was promoted to lead her team to root out the degenerative rot corrupting the vestiges of Imperial institutions. While the Empire's innumerable foes fell to steel and gunpowder in a wrathful reckoning, the arch-traitors suffered the cold hands of Death grasping around their necks.

Honor. Loyalty. Duty. Values that must be restored. The Kaiser has failed. The military has failed. The Heroes of the Empire are forgotten and unmourned. And what did the new Republic do? Let her people be scapegoated by the dissatisfied masses to avoid accountability for Germania's previous leadership. The spineless mongrels will pay dearly for this slander, serving the Francois for scraps. The hordes of betrayers from all fronts and all sides would face her vengeance.

Honor. Loyalty. Duty. Values that the Argent Silver upholds.

No.

She is Honor. She is Loyalty. She is Duty. Visha, bless her filthy biased Russy heart, had written letters to Muller about her experience serving underneath Tanya von Degurechaff and spoke nothing but praise for her good character and self-sacrifice. After reading the files of the Devil of the Rhine, she only realized how her good friend's descriptions did not give justice to Tanya's intelligence. Silver was too lowly of a metal to become attached to von Degurechaff's name.

Tanya was as good as gold itself. She was as sure as the Sun rising in the West. For all this Enlightenment talk of the Social Contract, of rule by popular consent, God did not cease to exist.

The Divine Right of Kings did not cease to exist. No one on this rotten sinful earth can achieve so much without divine favor from the Heavens. No one.

Tanya von Degurechaff was destined to lead Europe into a golden age, an empire to last ten thousand years, where no man or woman would fear the darkness ever again.

Honor. Loyalty. Duty. Values that must be protected. And it begins with a knock on the door.

Elena straightened out her new black uniform one last time. Respect to Herr Voss for joining Tanya's movement and contributing to the Reichsbanner. The yellow armband depicting the Schwarzer Drache contrasted nicely with the attire.

A moment later, the door opened to reveal a middle-aged housekeeper.

"Ah, he told me he is expecting someone like you to show up. Are you from the DDP?" she asked.

Elena nodded before being let in. She followed the housekeeper to her target's location. The old man was in the parlor, smoking like a chimney, looking mildly surprised when he saw who his guest was.

"Fraulein Muller? Is that you?"

"Guten Tag, Herr von Rudensdorf. I'm glad that we finally have the chance to become acquainted with each other. Only properly this time."

The Great War veteran sat up straighter in his seat. His eyes were immediately drawn to the yellow armband. He set aside his cigar and quickly called for his maid to bring out coffee and tea.

"Likewise…I see you have been productive in seeking out a new employer. I feel as if I should've known who given your unique skillset." He remarked, looking lost in his thoughts.

"Indeed. Out of all your exploits, raising a child to become your champion has got to be your greatest achievement yet. It is a true shame I have never seen her in action." Elena smiled.

"Yes. It has to be seen to be believed."

"Exactly, but that is not why I am here."

Rudensdorf let out a long, drawn-out sigh.

"The election. I was offered to become President of the Republic as part of the deal between the conservatives and the progressives. I'm still considering it due to my previous attempt at being head of state."

"Did the DNVP advocate for Tanya von Degurechaff to serve as Chancellor?" Elena inquired.

"No. The Progressive Bloc settled on Herr Berning of Zentrum, a choice that proved to be most amicable to the political right."

How… inconvenient.

"Regardless," Elena grinned, "I implore you to accept their proposal. For the good of the nation and the Empire."

"So the rumors are true then…" Rudensdorf said.

"What rumors?"

"She wants the throne, doesn't she? The radio talks, the speeches, joining the liberals…sometimes I wonder if the liberals are as oblivious as they let on." He stared at Elena who met his gaze with unwavering intensity.

"You already know the answer to that question and because of it, you will do your part in assuring her ascension. Accept the role of Presidency and allow for Germania to be placed in safer hands."

"Safer?" Rudensdorf almost looked offended.

Elena's smile was finally dropped and replaced with a deep scowl.

"In a great number of instances, throughout my service to the Empire, I have found the former Kaiser and your dictatorship engaged in policies, at least to me, that seemed extremely irrational and counterproductive. I had found the direction of the war to be increasingly lost and confused following the escalation of the Great War.

To this extent, I place my faith and the vital interests of the Germanian people in hands more qualified, hands more worthy, to lead this country."

The glare that the retired Field Marshal gave could poison wells and salt fields.

"I think you have taken up too much of my personal time here. I believe there are other responsibilities you must attend to." he finally spoke, gesturing to his housekeeper to guide Elena to the front door.

"I believe I do. However, when you accept the position of becoming the next President, it is imperative that you clean yourself of the Stab-in-the-Back myth to ensure that the office retains enough credibility in the coming year." She called out to him, "I expect to see a full apology in the newspaper for leading the Germanian people astray with deceit."

Rudensdorf simply grunted in reply and just before Elena heard the door slam behind her, she couldn't help but pick up one last comment delivered to the old maid.

"Don't let that brown-haired bitch enter my estate again. I will not be another target of her dogma."

Silly Rudensdorf. Thinking Elena couldn't hear those words. Thinking he was safe inside his walls. Thinking his reputation would protect him.

Deine Gedanken sind frei, ich kenne sie alle!

Chapter Ten - Curiosity in Konigsberg

The Brown House in Konigsberg, Pullska was a great mansion, but admittedly pretty mundane compared to the other architecture in the city. Regardless, the fact that Himmler could obtain a large estate to use as his party's headquarters was a testament to his influence and attraction. Upon arrival, my eyes first laid witness to black banners hanging off of windows and the main entrance, all depicting a white circular swastika in the center, its arms curving with the circumference of the ring rather than the usual straight and rigid angles. Given my beige Reichsbanner uniform, the party guards looked at me with a quizzical look, no doubt at a loss for words at my non-traditional female dress.

I vaguely remember how Himmler was fascinated with esoteric bigotry. It was his morbid curiosity toward military cultures that incentivized Hitler to declare the Japanese "Honorary Aryans." The SS uniforms were a sight to behold at anime conventions.

"Pardon me, sir." I caught the attention of one of the party members. "Is this the cult?"

"We're not a cult, fraulein." He answered, "This is the party of true-blood Germanians, to reunite the fractured Germanic peoples under one banner, and revive the ancient glory of our ancestors, the Aryans."

"This is it." I turned to my current partner. "You were right on the location, Herr Foerster."

After the wedding in Warschau was over, I traveled north to Danzig to meet up with the DNVP journalist to update him on my current plans. He was more than happy to join me on my escapade to Konigsberg since this would allow him to get an inside look at the National Volkist Front spearheaded by Himmler. Given the high racial standards for membership, the movement was surrounded by secrecy and mysticism.

Not that I had a care for such superstition. Despite the guards' attempts to halt my advance, I brushed past them towards the front door with Foerster in tow. I knocked rather fiercely on the heavy wood, so much so that the journalist felt anxious over my knuckles.

Not a moment too soon, the door opened just a crack to reveal another volkisch thug with a very young face poking his head out. He looked slightly confused upon seeing the two of us and looked ready to ask a question but I had already beaten him to the punch.

"What is this place?" I demanded.

"This is the party headquarters for the National Volkist Front," he answered.

"Why is there no name of your political movement in the front entrance? How did you manage to grow your party to such a size missing such a crucial component of public branding? Your desire for secrecy is ironic. Get out of the way!"

With a great shove, I pushed the heavy wooden doors, almost knocking the gate guardian on his ass, and walked right in as if I was storming an enemy bunker.

"Hey, this is our private office! Invitation only! Stop, please," came another voice from the adjacent room next to the grand hall. "Can you - ooooooh, man…."

The interior of the Brown House was what you might expect in a far-right nationalist organization. There are old paintings depicting a romanticist view of Germanic history: nude full-breasted women carrying healthy children in their arms, and brawny and blond-haired men brandishing swords and hammers slaying a great mythic beast as if they were Hollywood action heroes. There were smaller versions of the black flags hanging down from the ceiling and on every railing. Even the floor of the grand hall had massive Schwarze Sonne painted on the floor.

I immediately marched into one of the rooms that looked to be a recreation room or a library for members to relax and engage in some small talk. Practically everyone on the first floor had their attention on me, probably because I was the only woman present.

"Do you have an invitation to be here?" asked the gate guardian. He got bonus points for trying to act confrontational, but such a trick did not affect me.

"Since when does a fringe national movement gain popularity by being as exclusionary as possible?" I shot back, matching his engagement with a death glare of my own. "I want to speak to your party chairman."

"You mean the Volksfuhrer?" he answered sheepishly.

Dear God, this Himmler is an egomaniac. I quickly turned my head away in disgust. Why did I let my curiosity get the better of me? Good thing Foerster was ready to make himself look scarce, trying to blend into the background.

"Who should I say is here?" the party sycophant asked, careful to avoid stepping on the metaphorical glass shards.

"The name is Tanya von Degurechaff," I answered, not leaving any room for discussion.

The young lad quietly nodded in acknowledgment and immediately went upstairs, who knows how many floors up, to get Himmler down here. This left me free to walk around the room and examine the contents there. There was nothing of value present: just books and posters glorifying the occult. Good heavens, they make Calvinists look sane.

"Blud und Boden." I repeated the words from a party propaganda poster. "I didn't know this was an environmentalist party. Does anyone have any empirical evidence that human blood is a sufficient substitute for freshwater? I did not know plants were vampires."

"Is this for the Warschau Courier?" the young man returned, poking his head through the door frame.

"This is for the Empire!" I roared.

That caused him to disappear once again. One more minute passed and Leopld Himmler finally showed up as he had just run a marathon. Unlike some of his sycophants, Himmler was impeccably dressed in the cleanest suit and tie I ever saw. Ignoring the swastika armband, I focused solely on his face.

He was a bespectacled creature of a man with a clean-shaven face save for a toothbrush mustache and a comb-over for a haircut. From appearance alone, he looked to be an astute intellectual, a gothic novelist, or even a Germanian Expressionist painter. But his eyes told a different story; those eyes belonged to a madman who saw corruption everywhere.

For me though, he was like an otaku meeting a cosplayer dressed up as his highly coveted waifu. Already, I felt my skin crawl when he looked at me with those lecherous eyes, practically undressing me with that stare. I dared hope that Visha would never wear those kinds of eyes around me.

"Oh my…it's…it's you. It's the Argent Silver." Himmler gasped, acting like Christmas had come early. "I am Leopold Himmler. Volksfuhrer of the National Volkist Front."

"Please. Come, sit." I took a seat and gestured at an empty chair next to me. "We must talk."

He wasted no time to occupy that space.

"It is my pleasure," he said in the most haughty voice imaginable, while the crowd seemed to grow only bigger as more people got wind of who the new guest was.

"So you represent the national cause of the Germanian people?" I asked.

"Well…I do not want to steal your glory. Out of everyone here, you offered the most sacrifice to the Fatherland. I am but a humble servant to our people."

"Ugh, if I ever meet a humble servant, I will let you know."

Himmler quickly gave a small laugh in reply but my face was stone cold.

"My question is, what have you accomplished for our people up until now?" I said.

"The soup kitchens -"

"Everyone and their mother has set up soup kitchens in these trying times. What makes yours any different? Do you offer free chocolate cake?"

"Okay… let's start over." Himmler looked more drained of his enthusiasm. "We the National Volkist -"

"National Volkist! What are you trying to accomplish? Going all over Europe, digging up dirt like pseudo-archaeologists, to prove that moving the earth is a sign of racial superiority?" I tried my hardest not to scream out my frustrations.

"Our ancient ancestors were the original inhabitants of Europe."

"Our ancient ancestors were living in thatch huts, eating out of clay bowls and wooden spoons, while the ancestors of the Illdoans were building marble cities and creating an imperial civilization. How is that evidence of Germanic superiority? How stupid are you?"

Himmler was completely taken aback by my retort but I was not done yet.

"Are you even a Papalist?"

"No. I gave up that false religion - "

"False? False?! Where are you getting all these ideas from?"

"Von Listfels and von Lieben. The founders of Ariosophy. They have demonstrated that the Germanics are the pinnacle of human evolution," he answered, shoving the party manifesto into my hands. "If I could just show you -"

"Is that the reason why you turned away from God or why God turned away from you?" I literally could not believe what I was hearing. "You left the Church not because of the corruption, not because of the accusations of pedophilia, not because of the general dissatisfaction of the Papalist community, but because it didn't validate your fragile egocentrism?"

"Hold on…this is…" Himmler shifted uncomfortably, looking around the room and spotting Foerster. "Why is he here? Is he recording this meeting? Get him out!"

"No!" I roared, throwing my fist upon the table. "I am wasting my time talking to you. I am on a mission to save Germania from further collapse while idiots like you consult a crystal orb to figure out tomorrow's weather."

I threw his book back into Himmler's face who recoiled as if he got shot.

"Every single one of your words brings shame and humiliation for Germanians everywhere." I spat. "What is your definition of a Germanian?"

"Blonde hair and blue eyes are the most ideal." Himmler stuttered. "Our people to be strong, intelligent - "

"Most ideal? Most ideal?! You don't have blonde hair or blue eyes. You know that people can change the color of their hair in the future right? Even their eyes too, through surgery." I got up from my seat and looked at the hypocrisy among the crowd. "Your working definition is already obsolete."

"There is also a criterion for racial purity." Himmler looked up with pleading eyes.

"Racial purity." I scoffed, "Is that why your euphemism for incest? A pureblood Germanian would sooner die of a cold than be the ubermensch of your dreams. Have you forgotten the ethnic makeup of the Empire? Genetic diversity allows our people to grow and endure. You don't believe me? Go to a graveyard."

The party chairman now looked really offended but his anger looked more like a crying child throwing a tantrum. After spouting a series of anti-semitic insults directed at my face, Himmler still had the audacity to call me a "Judean in human skin" before shrinking underneath my gaze.

I was not amused.

"Since you know about my 'mother', perhaps you can take me to her. Assuming you didn't order your men to murder or harass every Judean they come across," I replied calmly.

Looking around the room, I have to say this was a disappointment. I was expecting a party like the Communists: organized, disciplined, and highly intelligent. But the men here were meek, silent, and pathetic. The embodiment of sadness: these National Volkists.

"Gentlemen, if this is your best man to represent the Germanian people, then may God have mercy upon us all." I evacuated the building with Foerster following me. "We'll need it."

"I have to admit." Foerster spoke up after we walked away from the Brown House, "You are full of surprises. Did you see the look on their faces when you marched away? It was majestic!"

"I can only imagine." I grunted, "Now, what are you planning to do next?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. That meeting with Himmler. It is going to make headlines, I can feel it. My boss in the DNVP is going to be quite pleased that I manage to obtain an inside look at the National Volkish Front." He opened his great coat to reveal one of Himmler's party manifestos and a couple of other book materials. "This will take some time to decipher."

"Then I shall not take too much of your time. I will be on my way."

"Are you sure you don't want to travel together a little longer? My associates have set up an office in the city. It should be just on the other side of the city."

Thinking for a moment, I supposed no harm can be done by further ingraining myself with the conservatives. After all, I needed to make sure Herr Class continued to stick with his end of the bargain. Otherwise, I would have to share some pointed words with some very pointed blades.

"Lead the way," I said, wanting to get as far away from the Brown House as possible.

Despite the region of Preussia being majority ethnic Germanians, the Treaty of Triano saw it fit for Pullska to own all of it in order to have a sizable coastline. Yet, despite the different flags, the rules stayed largely the same. Contrary to the American perspective, the Pullskans did enjoy equal rights under the Empire, other than the occasional glass ceiling set in place by the DkP.

Germanian was still spoken and used in everyday life, just now the language was subservient to the Pullskan. No doubt it was a massive adjustment to Germanian nationalists everywhere in Preussia, but personally, I do not mind it. Practically everyone in the Empire could speak Germanian as a first or second language so the new status quo was not as "disruptive."

As far as I could see in the busy streets of Konigsberg, the people largely seemed unbothered. Sure, the Germanians were no longer first-class citizens but with inflation and unemployment running rampant, their lost status would be the least of their concerns. People all around were just feeling the pinch in their wallets of this new world Central Europe has found itself in. Like President Erbel and Chancellor Herimann, Moscic had a lot on his plate to clean up to ensure a return to normalcy.

"Don't look behind now but two Judeans are following us," Foerster whispered suddenly, trying to increase his walking pace. He immediately saw my sour look erupting all over my face. "Not in a prejudiced manner. There are two - now six Judeans following us."

"How long have they been following us?" I asked.

"Five, six minutes perhaps. They could have followed us even earlier."

"Why are you so concerned?"

"Because this is Himmler's territory still…"

Only then did I realize that the streets we were walking on seemed more sparsely crowded than usual. Just up ahead of us, six men in greatcoats emerged from the alleyway and walked towards us. To our immediate right, another six men emerged from a coffee shop and looked at us with ill intent.

"God damn Judeans…" the DNVP journalist cursed under his breath, clearly panicking.

"Are you armed?" I asked calmly.

"No," he whispered back, more fiercely than usual. "Are you?"

"No," I replied, feeling a tug of a cruel smile when our ambushers pulled out wooden clubs, knuckle dusters, and even knives.
This… did not look good for us. I think we may have wandered into a mafia or a rival paramilitary group. My beige uniform may have set off the wrong alarm in their heads.

"Gentlemen," I said, looking in both directions, "I highly recommend reconsidering your actions."

Some of them laughed as they continued to approach us and spoke to each other in Yiddish.

"Why?" one of them asked sarcastically. He was easily the tallest man in the group, as tall as Heydryk. He was armed with a particularly nasty-looking knife.

"Because killing is bad for your soul."

"But when done righteously, it is a chore like any other," he replied, with cold anger in his words. "Himmlerites."

Our window of escape was closing faster by the second. We were surely done for if we allowed ourselves to be surrounded. I didn't want to make a scene but we had no choice.

We'd need a distraction.

I quickly shoved Foerster onto the pavement, causing him to shriek and flail pathetically trying to keep the contents of his suitcase from spilling out, and in that moment, where everyone's eyes were on him, I lunged forward and threw a heavy right hook into the big man's scrotum.

He let out a shriek of his own as I used my other hand to attack his wrist to steal his knife from his hands. I immediately used it to stab him in the liver before kicking him into his allies. With his huge size, he knocked over half a dozen of his allies like they were bowling pins. That got everybody's attention, allowing Foerster to quickly scramble away to hide in an alley.

Immediately, they rushed in as one. Judging by their coordination and innate familiarity with their weapons, the men were not mere mafia hitmen, they were Great War veterans trained in close-quarter combat. I recognized their movements; the war academy during the Great War had an entire training curriculum on trench raiding and hand-to-hand combat.

Though trained as they were, they were highly predictable. I brought up my purse to use a shield when the first man tried to shank me with his knife. It got stuck instantly, allowing me the

opportunity to stab him back in the throat quickly. A geyser of blood squirted all over my hand and face as I dropped my ruined purse to grab him by the neck and use his body as a shield against his comrades.

I really wished Pilsud or Foerster had smuggled me a computation orb, any orb, right now. This fight could have ended a whole lot cleaner.

I swayed the body left and right as the thugs sought ways to attack me from the flank. Fear was starting to emerge in their eyes, their hesitation creeping in, as they quickly pondered what to do next.

But I wasn't going to give them a chance. The knuckle dusters I could endure but the knives and the bludgeons I could not. I counterattacked by hastily throwing the bleeding body back at their faces before rushing forward. They were focused on my face but not on my hands. The last knife holder found his forearm stabbed and his knife taken. I immediately crouched and forced him forward, allowing his head to take an overhead swing from a wooden club that was directed toward me.

With that second knife, I turned around and threw it towards the nearest foot I saw, prompting its owner to curse loudly in pain. However, I was quickly grabbed by his ally and thrown against a brick wall. I grabbed my hat and threw it in that guy's face, and after a moment of blind panic from having an obscured vision, he threw a blind jab that missed by a mile. I stabbed the knife into his exposed armpit before body-slamming him into the ground. Of course, I was grabbed and thrown off of him.

My new opponent grabbed a few good hits into my belly to pin me against the wall before screaming at his comrade to wack me on the head with his wooden club. He was strong, very strong, trying to wrestle the knife away from my grip. Again, he was watching my face and my hands but not my legs which I used to kick at his knees. It was enough to finally break free from his iron grip and narrowly missed a skull-cracking strike from the bludgeon.

He used his hands to cover his face from a strike unaware that was not my target. The man roared in pain when he found his palms skewered by my knife, one palm on top of the other, like a kebab. I was about to immediately lunge toward the club-wielder only to realize he had reinforcements. Foerster was apprehended and used as a hostage to get me to stand down.

"Get on your knees," the leader demanded. His face reminded me of Himmler, only with a rounder face wearing thick-rimmed glasses and thicker eyebrows.

A gun was pointed at Foerster's head by the same man who was restraining him. I pulled out the bloodied knife from my last opponent's hands, wiped it clean from the sleeves of my dress, and threw it at the crowd. The leader seemed to flinch as if he was the one getting struck but upon hearing a pistol falling to the ground, he realized it was Foerster's captor who found a knife lodged into his throat before crumpling like a bag of wet cement.

After an awkward moment of silence, the leader spoke up again.

"Who are you?" he asked, his tone suddenly changing.

"Give me your name, idiot, and I will give you mine."

"Zhabotinski. Yevgen Zhabotinski."

"Tanya von Degurechaff."

"Oh..."

I raised an eyebrow.

"You didn't join the National Volkish Front, did you?"

"No. I did not." I answered, "Is that why you attacked me? Because you thought I was a two-faced hypocrite?"

Zhabotinski visibly struggled to answer my question. The man probably never had experienced such indecision before.

"Uhhhh. Maybe." He winced. "Sorry for not recognizing you earlier."

While ordering his followers to clean up the street brawl, Zhabotinski quickly escorted me back into the cafe and gestured for the business owner to take us to a hidden, secluded room. Once we were truly alone, the Judean leader immediately turned around and fell to his knees.

"I am truly sorry for not recognizing you earlier! My informants had only described two people, new faces, entering the Brown House. One of them was a blond woman with blue eyes…"

"Listen…as far as bad first impressions go…" I tried to get him to stop his blubbering, "Just what were you planning to do today?"

"I was going to root out Himmler and his National Volkist ideology. We mistook you and your friend as his informants," he answered with great tears forming at the edges of his eyes. "I am really sorry. About everything. Please, please, I don't want what happened today to be published in the paper."

"Why is that?" I raised an eyebrow before it suddenly hit me: he must have known that Foerster worked for the DNVP.

"It will ruin me. Ruin my community. Ruin my people!"

"Your people?" I quickly slapped him back into reality. "I'm not here to judge you. I just want to know why."

"I wanted to be protected. I wanted my home to be safe. Sure, it was bad before but never this uncomfortable…With Himmler making his speeches about the racial supremacy of the Germanic race, it was only a matter of time before he began to carry it out."

"So you organized." I said.

Zhabotinksi nodded fervently with such speed that I was scared of his glasses falling to the floor.

"I thought you were still in Germania. I thought the appearance was merely a coincidence..." he grimaced.

"Well, I did have a wedding to attend do." I remarked, "Regardless, I do not take offense to what your men have conducted today. I know very well how badly this would set back Judean-Germanian relations."

He let out a small sigh of relief.

"What - what are we to do?"

"We?" I repeated, "I need to get out of this city. You need to halt your offensive against Himmler."

"What?" His eyes shot wide. "Why?"

"Don't make him a martyr. By attacking his party, you are giving him a platform to vindicate his vile rhetoric. Delusional as he is, we cannot give him the impression of victory."

"But that won't stop him from attacking me and my kin!"

"Hence why I applaud you for organizing a militia. However, it has to be for defensive purposes only. If you need to strike first, coordinate with the national government."

"Coordinate…" Zhabotinski hummed. "Is it possible?"

"The Socialist Party is the current ruling party. Ingrain yourself to them as a valuable asset and they will assist you in protecting civil rights in Pullska."

"Does it have to be the Socialist Party?" he asked, undoubtedly hesitant.

I couldn't fault him for questioning my suggestion; the Socialist Party seemed to be unreliable at best and insanely fickle at worst. But the Socialists were the ones in charge which means what they did now will set a precedent for future ruling coalitions down the line.

"No." I answered, "But I do advise you to approach them first. After that, keep your options open to build an alliance to ensure a stable democratic coalition."

Chapter Eleven - Pilsud Pulling My Strings

------"My cousin has returned safely to Munich bearing roses and chocolates. His parents were proud of his promotion. Hessen will look quite lovely next month.

Your dear friend, Visha, has found a new partner to paint her house walls red. He is erudite, organized, and well-connected in White Russy communities, if eccentric by your standards.

I look forward to you returning to the office and giving him a proper welcome. Only you can get his mind out of the gutter, that charmer. I hope your stay in Pullska has been productive and pleasant.

In addition, your woodsman has returned safely to deliver timber to his village.

Safe Journeys,
Elena Muller"-------

"What are you reading?" asked Rabbi Avidan Lodz, his words laced with curiosity as he approached me.

"My party secretary has been practicing her poetry." I answered plainly before putting away the letter. I contemplated throwing it into a fireplace.

Four months ago, if you'd told me that I would kill a few members of a Judean paramilitary in Konigsberg in self-defense and I would be attending their funerals with their relatives as a result, I would ask you why I would be in Konigsberg in the first place. Despite being dragged into other affairs, it was better than sitting around and waiting for Pilsud to set up a meeting. At least I was productive enough to ingrain myself with the Judean community in the city. Only, it would be in the wrong nation.

That was how I met Rabbi Lodz; he was respected enough among his peers to be asked to carry out the funeral rites. It was certainly awkward meeting the parents, siblings, and spouses of the men I had slain in their neighborhood. I felt dirty still when they accepted my apology and how the whole situation was a gross misunderstanding. I tried to repay my debt to the people by playing the bodyguard to prevent fascist interruptions.

I didn't want to do a disservice by giving an unwanted eulogy and stealing the attention.

"May I ask you a personal question?" the elder asked.

"I cannot stop you from saying it inside your mind." I remarked, "Ask away."

"Why?"

"Why… what?"

"Why do this? Why do all of this?" He said, "Why are you helping us? After what he did to you…"

"Because it is the right thing to do," I replied, "Is it wrong to be charitable and forgiving? I'm sorry, I didn't know basic human decency is frowned upon."

The rabbi smiled softly but I saw the sorrow in his eyes.

"But doesn't this… risk your election chances? We are not well-liked in Germania."

"Rabbit Lodz, please." I huffed, "I have seen men bleed out in the trenches of the Great War; I have seen their bellies torn open and their intestines spilled onto the mud. I heard them cry out for death, for mercy, for water. I have seen men broken by war, their faces mangled and limbs missing, as they crawled their way back home."

I sighed. Even in my dreams, I could still see her face: Mary Sioux. She could've lived a peaceful life, a good life, away from fire and smoke. Even in death, I still felt her hate, her sorrow, and her overwhelming shock.

"I am not afraid of losing an election. I will have opportunities to try again using methods more successful and assuring. But to tell a more cynical truth: I need the Judean vote for my party."

"Do your fellow party members share a similar sentiment?"

"They're adults. They know better. I trained them myself," I answered. "We knew when the war was lost."

For a while, we both said nothing as we sat and watched the people pay their last respects to the coffin of Karl Golan, the man who stuck a pistol to Foerster's head and found a knife sticking into his throat. For a man who survived the Great War, it was a cruel fate: being killed by another veteran from the same country.

For his own good, Foerster better keep his mouth shut when he returns to the DNVP about what happened.

"When do you plan on heading back?" Rabbi Lodz said suddenly.

"As soon as I am done organizing a conference with the President. Though at this point, I am ready to accept a letter to deliver back to Berun."

It was surprising how fast October was coming to a close. Germania's election day was set to arrive in 28 days and only now did I get a chance to meet Moscic in four days. So many things have already gone wrong during my stay here in Pullska. First, Moscic's government had collapsed, and although he'd managed to hold onto power, his party now only held a minority in the Pullskan parliament, the Sejm. Without a miracle, Moscic would surely get kicked out of office in the upcoming Pullskan election. To make matters worse, under Francois pressure, Warschau had been engaged in a disastrous trade war with Germania, further accelerating the hyperinflation and unemployment in the country.

Anti-Francois sentiment among the Pan-Nationalists shot through the roof after the Francois Republic signed an agreement of detente, the Treaty of Minsk, with the Russy Federation. It contained vague overtures to secure stability in Central and Eastern Europe, but the right-wing Germanians and Pullskans were quick to accuse both countries of splitting the continent in two, with the post-imperial states partitioned between the Francois and Russyites.

In other words, the Sejm was like the Reichstag in Berun, only worse. I just hoped that my advice to the progressive leaders had been heeded and implemented in Germania.
Anti-semitism was just barely boiling above the surface in Warschau and although I rarely saw Himmler's face, I still spotted his henchmen roaming about, only more angry and, oddly enough, increasingly lost. Yet, they at least retained enough self-control to ask me a few mundane questions about the current situation whenever I ran into them.

Questions. Questions. Questions. In this era of possibilities, certainty was needed now more than ever. Even experienced men like Pilsud were deeply conflicted about the current direction of their country. Despite being old enough to be my grandfathers, they turned to me for answers. Pilsud was very adamant about arranging a secret meeting with me. He could not conceal his deep disappointment with his former friend, Moscic.

His frown was a thunderstorm that never ended.

"I am already planning to meet the Socialist president and we're already going to see each other in the capital. Do we really need to meet like this?" I asked the Field Marshal.

This meeting, unlike in Osby, was more informal as everyone present wore plain military attire deprived of all medals. Only then did I realize why Weiss was so interested in acquiring a new uniform; even at their most basic colors, the Pullskan generals and officers looked fashionably better than me.

"Yes." He answered with steel in his voice. "What will happen here will decide the fate of Pullska."

"And what is that?" I asked, feeling uneasy when I saw the men form a semi-circle before me.

"First, I would like to have another autograph," Pilsud stated, pulling out a small postcard that contained my face on it. The design was pulled from an old war-time propaganda poster. "I promised my grand-niece for her birthday."

I stared blankly back at the Field Marshal and his associates before grabbing the pen offered to me.

"Surely, this can't be all," I remarked, glaring at the old men present.

"Before we move onto the next part," Pilsud said, looking rather giddy when he got that autograph back, "What is your opinion of Moscic?"

"The President? I feel frustrated with his current decision-making though I do sympathize with his thought process. The poor performance in his recent policy direction has cost him his majority in government and all the political momentum with it. An effect that will force him to rule by decree unless Moscic can shift his focus toward more productive endeavors."

"So we agree," another military officer announced, walking forward to pluck the pen out of my hands once I was done writing my signatures before leading me to a table stacked with wine and sausages. "It is an honor to meet you in person, Argent Silver. I am General Eckart Tarlowski."

Unlike Pilsud, Tarlowski was a younger man lacking much facial hair and a balding head. Yet his face was as round and solid as a cannonball. He bowed to kiss my hand much to my displeasure. Yet he pretended not to notice.

"Please, enough with the niceties, what do you really need me for?"

Tarlowski looked at Pilsud for approval and the old commander gave a single nod.

"I will keep this straightforward: Moscic needs to go. He has soured the office of the Presidency for too long."

"It's been only a year," I retorted, drinking my glass of water.

"Exactly."

"And what are you planning to do with him?"

"Enact a putsch." Tarlowski answered with a straight face.

I spat out my water in disbelief and quickly looked around to see if this wasn't some kind of premature prank. But everyone present was dead serious.

No… this can't be happening.

"I… beg your pardon?"

"Moscic is a Francois puppet." Another man spoke up. "He needs to be removed from office."

"How can he? Did he not try to defend Magyarozag when it was attacked? When Daneland was threatened?"

"He did only the bare minimum to defend our brothers and sisters across the border!" came a shout. "He must go! He is unworthy."

"Moscic was only trying to keep the peace in the Little Entente." I tried to reason with the crowd. "To keep the alliance stable."

"An alliance that seeks to turn us into Parisees' puppets. Have you not read of what happened in Minsk? The Francois would sooner let the East fall to communism as long as they keep the West," said another.

"Can't everyone here just wait for the next Pullskan election?"

"No," Pilsud answered, putting his hand on my shoulder. "We have all made up our minds: the sooner we can clean the politics of Pullska, the better."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked, feeling disturbed under his grip.

"We need you as our messenger and the message," Tarlowski stated. "Your meeting with the President will be a golden opportunity to present an ultimatum: he can either stand down and allow for a peaceful transfer of power or it will be a violent one instead. Once you say your piece, our inside contact will notify us to proceed."

I immediately knocked away Pilsud's hand and got up from my seat. Why? Why were they so quick to overthrow their own government?

"You expect me to be complicit in your treason against the Republic? To assist you in overthrowing a democratically elected regime? Just because you all believe that he has betrayed the Pules?"

"Yes," they said.

My blood ran cold. Why was this happening? Nothing good can come out of a military junta, for anyone involved.

"Argent Silver," Tarlowski said, "We appreciate your concern for Moscic, we do. Your capacity for mercy makes you worthy of sainthood…. We're not executing anyone, just so you know, only expelling him and his cronies from politics."

"You swear on it?" I inquired.

"If he does not resist, we swear on it," Pilsud answered, his tone leaving no more room for argument.

"Are you all unaware that what you are plotting would violate the people's mandate, their preference of government?"

"Argent Silver, the goal for democracy was that it served the people and the interests of the state; it has accomplished neither. Our people's concerns are not reflected: they want jobs, security, and freedom from Bolshevism. The national interests of Pullska have also not been reflected by the system," the balding general explained.

"But it can work! It does work!" I retorted.

They dared to laugh at me.

"That's what I love about you, Tanya von Degurechaff," Pilsud commented, his eyes growing soft and tender for a moment. "You always look for the best in everyone and everything. But the matter of fact is, today's politics are poisoned. Fascists, Communists, National Vanguardists, and Volkists are causing the whole structure to rot. Moscic had only allowed corruption and inflation to run rampant on the streets. It all needs to be cleaned for our people to heal."

"Argent Silver…" Tarlowski said, regarding me with high praise. "Everyone here swore an oath to the Empire and the Kaiser; now, both of them are gone. The Francois has made Central Europe an anarchic wasteland and called it peace. It is only a matter of time before the Russy Federation marches west. As strong as the Francois Republic is, they cannot triumph against the Red Army.

"We need your help before Moscic causes any more damage to our people, to our nation, to our future…. He is a security risk. He has to be removed. Help us and we will repay you tenfold."

I let out a long, drawn-out sigh before returning to my seat. I felt my face falling to my hands, fatigue conquering my mind and body as I tried to process their rationale. Security risk… how many times was I going to hear that? How many times would I hear the news of a democratic state getting overthrown by its military? My parents and grandparents had already lived through the effects of Tojo's reign.

"Can you assure me that you have the popular support to launch a putsch?" I inquired, still not wanting to show my face.

"In time, those with good hearts and sound minds will understand our methods of ruling and naturally conclude that what we did was best for the people of Pullska." Pilsud hummed. "If the republic does not provide good leadership and security, what good is it for?"

Pulling my hands away, I gathered my strength to look at Tarlowski and Pilsud in the eyes. This goes against everything I stood for but…I needed them. They were right about Russy, about the Francois. If they were so determined to overthrow the president… perhaps I could at least try to curb a Great Purge and protect the few democratic leaders that matter.

"I accept your terms." I said bitterly, "I expect your full cooperation when the time comes."

"I knew I could put my trust in you," Pilsud commented with a small smile. "General, please offer her the speech."

Speech?

"We have this prepared for you in anticipation of your acceptance," Tarlowski said, pulling out a few papers of printed text from a small folder. "Once you are done with your personal affairs with President Moscic, deliver this message to him and his cabinet."

I grabbed the papers, not bothering to read them first as my attention was still on Pilsud.

"How long were you planning this coup?" I demanded.

"Since Moscic made Pullska a puppet in the Little Entente." He answered, "Membership simply grew after the Magyar-Dacian War."

"I suppose I will see you all in four days -"

"Two." Tarlowski interrupted.

"Pardon?"

"Two. Since you accepted, we can push forward your meeting to be held the day after tomorrow. Our inside contact will make sure of it."

"How… convenient. May I know who this contact is?"

"You will know him when you see him." Pilsud replied and that was it.

After talking of treason, the men eagerly ate their dinner around the table and discussed matters more mundane. But I was too lost in my own thoughts to pay attention to their words. Two days. I supposed that was a good thing: two more days to use to get back into Germania. I doubted

Moscic's goodwill would still hold merit after Pilsud's coup. I would have to maneuver around the Reichsbanner leadership to march into Hessen, Westphalia, and the Rhineland.

It was a minor setback but one that could be tolerable if Pilsud is as honorable as he presents himself as. I just don't want to piss off the new leadership of an entire nation, especially a militant one.

It was a weird, funny feeling walking into Moscic's conference room; as if I was the Grim Reaper himself. How strange it was, despite my wartime service, as the guards and minor bureaucrats saluted me when I entered the building and walked through the halls. I had to force myself to smile to hide the growing discomfort.

If they knew my intentions and role, would they still allow me past the courtyard? There were a lot of soldiers around.

Technically, I wasn't committing treason but it wasn't too long ago that these people were my fellow countrymen. I should have no guilt in simply being the messenger of the conspiracy. And yet…

And yet…

I wondered if I should have blown the whistle early and alerted Moscic. But given how tensions were running high on the streets as the price of bread and beer shot up after the trade war, I remained doubtful that he could still gather enough public support. Knowing Pilsud and his ilk, he would only have gone through with a putsch if he was confident that a majority of the army was on his side.

If I had told Moscic the truth earlier, would he have tried to apprehend the Field Marshal? That would risk a civil war that would surely destroy the country. Stability was what was needed right now and if Pilsud believes he can provide it…

I just hope I made the right choice.

I felt unnecessarily cruel in deceiving the President of Pullska. What would my peers in the DDP think of me? What would Schlage think of me? Would he be happy that Pullska would be under a new regime more amicable to Berun? Or would he find the method of dissolving a liberal democracy too distasteful?

"Ah, Argent Silver!" Moscic was downright joyous upon seeing my face as I walked through the doors of the conference room. There were ten other men seated around a massive table, cabinet members of Moscic's regime, who were also equally delightful to see me. "We've been expecting you."

The men winced when they shook my hand when they came to introduce themselves; I must keep control before my doubts conquer my body. There was no time for hesitation, I was already committed to the role. Only Pilsud remained absent in his seat; he promised me an arm and a leg, and I expected them to be presented on a silver platter once this was over.

The President quickly had the aides pull over a luxurious chair for me to claim. Unlike Himmler, Moscic kept a respectable distance from me, though he leaned forward like a fanboy at a concert wanting to hear every note of his favorite idol.

"I would never imagine the day I would have the luxury to speak with the esteemed Argent Silver!" The statesman chuckled with his subordinates. "My friend here, Kazierz Balert, had told me you wanted to speak to me of matters of most importance concerning Germania. I am not sure how much I can tell you without divulging into federal records."

"My first request is more personal, Herr President." I replied, "It is about your old friends in the Social Democratic Party. President Erbel and Prime Minister Herimann, are those familiar names?"

"Of course, of course." He nodded, looking around the table. "Most of us are acquainted with him. I was once a close colleague of his during our university years. Those were the wild years…. Is there something wrong with them?"

"Not exactly. You see, I am sure you heard about the current political situation in Germania?"

Moscic nodded solemnly.

"The SPD has the largest… militia force in the country tasked to defend the new republic from extremist forces but unfortunately, Erbel and Herimann are hesitant of deploying them to maintain public order."

"So that's why you came to me? To talk to my old friends?"

"Exactly. I have recruited certain persons of special talent to uncover evidence of a communist revolution but I believe that is not enough to force the SPD to act. They need to comprehend the dangers of their inaction; their silence would only enable bolder plots to destabilize the republic."

"I understand… but surely your words hold merit." Moscic commented, "Why go through all the effort to speak with me, much less in front of my cabinet members?"

"Because I believe they respect you just as much." I answered with a sigh, "As for your question, there is another reason why I am here."

"Oh, what is it?"

"You… are in danger."

Moscic gave a small laugh.

"I am no stranger to violent confrontation. There's always a disgruntled worker or anarchist plotting my downfall."

"No, Herr President, the danger comes from within."

That wiped the smirk off of his face and replaced it with indignation. When I pulled out the speech given to me by the conspirators, Moscic turned pale with muted horror, as if I had just pulled out a grenade out of my purse.

"Following the current trend of your political decision-making, several people of notable status have approached me to act as their liaison. The second reason why I am here is to present you an ultimatum." I looked up from the document to look at the Pullskan president. "I am truly sorry it has to come to this…"

The room was already in an uproar as some of the younger ministers were quick to get out of their seats to head for the exit only to find it locked. The older men shouted for names. Demanded names of the conspirators all while Moscic regarded me with complete shock in his eyes. Only the Minister of Religion and Public Enlightenment, Kazier Balter, was deep in contemplation, unblinking when our eyes made contact.

I quickly looked down at my paper and forced out that next series of words.

"President Ignatsi Moscic, your style of governance and direction of this country is deeply troubling and detrimental to the health and security of Pulska and all the people that live within. You have done nothing but allow the enemies of the state to encroach on our borders and dictate national policy. We, the sons and daughters of the Empire, the children of Pulska, and the defenders of the free world seek your immediate resignation, including the resignation of your fellow party members."

"Why?" Moscic whispered, seemingly to himself. "Why?"

"Guards!" Minister of Internal Affairs, Stannis Wojeski, shouted, banging on the wooden doors with his fist. "Guards! Open these doors and arrest this criminal!"

His peers also banged on the panels of the wooden glass, trying to get the attention of the guards outside. The soldiers seemed to have gotten the message, only that it was from the wrong person, as some of the cabinet members saw several officers directing the men elsewhere.

"Who are these 'Defenders,' who?!" Minister of Justice, Wincler Witlos, demanded, looking ready to throw a punch in my direction. "Tell me! You damnable devil!"

"Treason. It is the only word to describe your actions thus far -" I was so ingrained in finishing the speech that I did not notice Witlos was upon me until he lifted me up by the neck and throttled me like a captured rabbit. That prompted Balter to start acting strangely as he moved his hand to be placed underneath the table, seemingly to perform some unknown action.

"Who are you working for? The National Volkists? The Fascists?" Witlos demanded, before slamming me onto the floor. "The fucking Communists?"

He would've strangled me to death if it weren't for Moscic and the Minister of Post attempting to break his grip on my neck and pry him off my body.

Just then, the doors burst open, revealing Field Marshal Pilsud, mustache and all, armed with an MP 28. He was not alone. Soldiers poured into the room with their machine pistols aimed at Moscic's men.

"HANDS UP WHERE I CAN SEE THEM!" He shouted, marching across the room to push the increasingly panicking Moscic against the wall. "Don't be so alarmed, old friend, just staging a coup here."

With the strength belonging to a man half his age, the old field marshal grabbed Witlos and threw him on top of the table, causing a flurry of papers, pens, and glasses to fly off and shatter.

"Keep your filthy mitts off of my war hero." Pilsud told the minister, "Are you hurt, my lady?"

Not wanting to condemn Witlos to a firing squad, I shook my head before pulling myself off of the ground.

"Herr Balter," the commander turned to the Minister of Religion and Public Enlightenment. "Does anyone here have any hidden weapons?"

"No," Balter answered. He was the only one that didn't have a barrel point at his head.

"You're a fucking disgrace to democracy!" Witlos spat bitterly as he was dragged off the table by Pilusd's loyalists. Gunshots started ringing throughout the building.

"I thought you said you weren't going to kill them," I spoke up, crumpling the speech I was given.

"I did." Pilsud replied, "I will spare them. I didn't say I would spare anyone else. Ok boys, shoot the rest of the dissenters if they do not surrender."

"Wait. Wait!" I quickly ran after Tarlowski who was going to lead some of the soldiers down a separate hallway while the main contingent escorted Moscic and his government out of the room. However, I was quickly halted by Pilsud who grabbed my shoulder.

"I want to express my gratitude for your assistance." He smiled. "It could not have gone better."

"I didn't want this to happen."

"There are plenty of events that occurred that you did not wish to happen but these are the tools we are given."

"We could have gone down a different path, a better path."

"We still can, dear Argent, but only under my direction." Pilsud remarked.

"How? HOW?!" I demanded.

For a moment, he said nothing. Only regarding me with praising eyes that hid a sliver of contempt. I quickly removed his hand from my shoulder. That only gave him the incentive to smirk with approval.

"You will know my methods once you see it in action but for now, I think it is time for you to return home…" he replied before walking away. "Your friends need you in Berun now."

"Don't you DARE change the subject! Do you not understand what you have done?!" I shouted at him, yet my words seemed to only bounce off the wall and into the abyss.

"Yes, I do."

"Then you know how my involvement in this putsch would harm me and my movement!"

"On the contrary, this will only solidify it." His voice echoed in the hallway. "I would say good luck on the election but you don't need it."

Chapter Twelve: The First Heads of Hydra - Part 1

Viktoriya Ivanovna Serebryakov had always been a loyal devotee to Tanya von Degurechaff's leadership ever since she first laid eyes on the Ace of Aces when the golden child awaited her like an angel sent from heaven to deliver her from her own blood, vomit, and piss. Ever since then, the Empire she had grown to call home was stagnant, degenerative, and filled with failure; leaving her and her fellow White Emigres disillusioned and embittered by the Imperial cause.

But not Tanya von Degurechaff. Never Tanya von Degurechaff. Serebryakov found the words coming from her major's mouth both disturbing and enlightening. Victory was assured but not without absolute confidence in the orders of her dear leader. While the Empire was suffocating from the pressures of war, it was Tanya who brought the war euphoria into her lungs as if she were not a conscript but a servant of Heaven. It was a tantalizing taste.

Addictive even.

What Tanya had demonstrated during the Great War was just a hint of what Holy Rus could have been under a truly benevolent, diligent leader. If only Tsar Nikolas II had a molecule of Tanya's infinite wisdom and foresight, he would not have been executed by the Bolsheviks and damned the entire empire to the perfidious Judeans. She would not have lost her uncles and aunts to the Red Terror.

But why show mercy to the Judeans? What have they done for Germania but brought ruin, catastrophe, and humiliation?

But most importantly, why was Tanya von Degurechaff so enamored with them? She didn't have a Judean for a lover, neither was she secretly Judean - Serebryakov would never dare slander her dear leader with such fallacious rumors. Not even in her dreams - her mind was a fortress with its gates barred and its walls guarded, forever protecting the golden light that Tanya had shown to her that day on the Rhineland Front.

Serebryakov has consulted her peers and even the Orthodox priests, even the ones too liberal for her tastes, but none could offer an answer to Degurechaff's attitude outside of a vague commitment to "Love Thy Neighbor." With the leader, it is never this simple. Never this straightforward.

There was always a plan. It was always another plot to succeed. Only once she had finally opened up her concerns to Elena Muller did Serebryakov realize the scope of Tanya's ambitions.

Her friend Muller shared a story that her grandmother used to tell her: There once was a little girl who came across a rattlesnake. The rattlesnake asked the girl to pick him up and be his friend. After the girl did so, the rattlesnake bit her. When the girl, now dying, asked, "Why did you bite me?" The serpent merely responded: "You knew what I was when you picked me up."

No wonder her dear leader had spent so much time and energy courting the Judenvolk: once they voted for their own destruction, no one would intervene to save them. Degurechaff's plan was so…so…perfect - brilliant even. A political deception of the highest scale.

A Judean-free Europe? An impossibility.

But with this plan, it was a reality becoming closer each minute.

Serebryakov could already see it: Kaiserin Tanya I on her golden throne, basking Europe with her infinite wisdom and benevolence; Holy Rus, liberated and pure from the Godless Reds; the decadent West, Francois and Albion, humbled and tamed.

And the Judenvolk. Gone. Every last one of them.

Their legacies removed and their memories buried; a foundation in which a free and prosperous Europe could rule the world while the Black Dragon, opulent and imperial, ruled Europe.

"Is our plight amusing you?" Herr Wilhelm Goering spat. Despite being given a chocolate cake with vanilla cream, he looked as grumpy as a toad in a dry pond.

Serebryakov snapped out of her daydreaming, realizing she was smiling the entire time while Muller was discussing matters with the non-Rohrite fascists.

"I'm sorry," the White Russy attempted to apologize, "I fail to see why everyone is suffering when such good food and wine is offered."

"Good food alone does not redeem a bad host." Goering retorted, "Our presence was mandatory."

"It was the only way to get all of you to come to this conference." Elena Muller replied quite harshly.

"You could have sent me a letter!"

"Which I did."

"By throwing a grenade through my window!"

"It was a brick."

"A brick strapped to dynamite!"

"They were candles wrapped in brown paper."

"Wrapping paper that had the word 'High Explosive' written on it."

"It was written in crayon with silly childish handwriting."

"You had a fake grenade thrown through your window?" said Herr Heinrich Class, "I was approached at gunpoint."

"Gentlemen, my lady." Hans von Zettour, on Visha's left, sat up from his seat to silence the bickering. "Can we not argue in my fine estate? We have more important matters to discuss. Matters that require your presence. So please enjoy the desserts and lunch. You would find no better chef on this side of the country."

"Yes." Visha nodded as she reviewed the members in the room. "Has everyone arrived?"

To her left were the Anti-Rohrite demagogues, the most prominent in the entire political landscape: Herr Goering and Herr Class were the usual suspects; men that represented the disgruntled Junkers and their Preussian nostalgia. Given their conservative views on female leadership, they obviously resented living under the shadow of Tanya von Degurechaff's agreement.

There was also Erwin Maximillian von Ludwig-Richter, an Ostdeutschvolk who maintained close connections with White Russy Emigres and the conservative Beruners - the only fascist present who wasn't coerced into joining this special event hosted on Zettour's estate. In fact, he was the only one sought out by Visha directly.

But behind Richter, perhaps the most important person in Serebryakov's life save for Tanya herself, was the Grand Duke and Tsesarevich Nikolas Vladimirovich Romanovy. The Tsar-in-Exile and uniting figurehead of the White Russy emigres across the former Imperial states. The young man shifted uneasily in his seat, clearly wanting to carry on with his journey to emigrate to Parisee. His 'Shadow Prime Minister,' philosopher and theorist, Alexander Ivanovich Il'in, by contrast, was far more enthusiastic for the occasion, going as far as making small talk with Secretary General Erich von Lergen.

Lergen, unlike everyone else in the room, seemed ready to bolt out of the room like a bullet shot from a gun if it weren't for his close relationship with Zettour. He simply sat in his seat as still as a statue and wished he was invisible. Visha had to hand it to him, Lergen wore his poker face well.

To the right side of Visha was, of course, Elena Muller, followed by her cousin Henning Muller, then Bruno Heydryck, and the squad commanders of the 203rd: Weiss, Koenig, and Neumann.

"Just waiting for one more person but he is rather unimportant for our current discussions so we can proceed." Muller replied, reviewing the guest list before looking back to the typist, signaling him to start recording.

Serebryakov rolled her eyes, no one is unimportant in Muller's eyes. This is the same woman who spied on her for the war effort when they were roommates. All because of a single joke she shared in military school.

"Then let us begin. Herr Muller, please, what is the latest status of Hessen?"

Pulling out a file, the detective pulled out several papers and maps to pass around the table.

"While I do not support the idea of Degurechaff presenting herself as bait for the Bolsheviks, her actions had forced them to reveal their hand too early." Henning Muller explained, pointing at several locations on the map of Kassel, "After interrogating the remaining instigator and coordinating with the local police, we raided several Communist party offices and city headquarters. That uncovered secret communication lines that led directly to hidden caches of weapons in these factories, this printing press, and even this beer hall. As it turns out, the Bolsheviks were transporting firearms by the dozen into Bavaria through the use of taxis."

"That's rather ingenious of them," Goering remarked, prompting murmurs of agreement around the table. "Is there a union of taxi cab drivers?"

"Yes." Muller nodded. "The union boss has been arrested for collusion with treasonous activities. The union members are still being processed by the Kassel police. I must say though, the procedure was not as clean as I hoped it would be."

"But Bavaria is safe from the Reds, right?" Class inquired, suddenly interested in the direction of this meeting.

"Yes…and no." Muller continued, shifting to another map. "By shutting down their primary method of delivery, the Bavarian police moved in to root out the insurrectionists. However, in order to do this, they had to rely on the muscle of Rohr's Brownshirts. As such, Southern Germania has emerged as a National Vanguardist stronghold; he is expanding his influence westward into Wuttemberg and Baden."

"That is…worrisome," Romanovy commented.

"Surely there has to be resistance." Weiss spoke up, "His revolutionary zeal is no better than the Kozis."

"We do have many holdouts loyal to the federal government," Muller continued, "But given the current trajectory of the current regime, their trust will only continue to wane given the lack of… aggression."

"What of the Judeans in the south?" Heydryck asked.

"Given the anti-semitism at the forefront of Rohr's policies, harassment, burglary and vandalism have increased tremendously," he replied.

The blonde giant softly grunted upon hearing the news.

"At least we know there are people who are guaranteed to support us in removing Rohr from Germanian politics."

"Rohr is not as secure as he thinks he is," Goering grumbled, digging into his cake. "His movement will grow bankrupt eventually. It's just a matter of preventing entry into the Reichstag. He will receive no aid from the Bavarian Junkers."

"It is also a matter of minimizing his damage inflicted in Southern Germania." Serebryakov added, "He may not have the power yet to putsch Berun, but he could march into Munich. What is the current number of his Brownshirts?"

Muller looked back to another paper and examined it before passing it to her.

"That many?" Serebryakov couldn't register how Rohr could hold sway over so many people. "Are there any mages among his ranks?"

"These are the optimistic estimates from my police department." Muller said, "At least 2 million Brownshirts concentrated in Southern Germania. As for any mages, we could not find evidence of mage work given the circumstances in Bavaria."

A wave of dread fell upon the room; Rohr commanded a body of men that surpassed the entire Red Army.

"We can take them." Neumann broke the silence, causing his two comrades to turn and stare blankly at him. Even with the combined numbers of their fascist allies, it was still a tall order.

"Elena?"

"Unfortunately, infiltration has proven to be more difficult than anticipated. Without more funding, I am rather limited in resources." she answered, glaring at Goering.

"You and your circus of whores can get more money from my employers once you liberate their assets in the West." He glared back. "That was the deal."

"Then let us shift focus to Westphalia and the Rhineland." Serebryakov said, "Elena, what have you managed to uncover?"

Tanya's spymaster pulled out a document from her suitcase.

"Like my cousin's report, these are optimistic estimations of the current strength of the Red Front: about 1.5 million armed personnel in Westphalia and the Rhineland. However, a majority, if not all, of their forces are merely militia. Plainly speaking, they are nothing more than factory workers who were given rifles and pistols. A professional army corps should be sufficient enough to scare them back into their workplaces and submit to Berun."

"Which would have been done months ago if the SPD wasn't sitting on their hands." Herr Class grumbled.

"Or if Tanya von Degurechaff marched in herself with her army in tow," Heydryck muttered, earning him unsaid agreements from the 203rd veterans. "Speaking of which, why is she not here still? Shouldn't the wedding be over by now?"

"Indeed." Elena Muller nodded, "Though, my past associates had described her to be partaking in some errands in Konigsberg."

"Konigsberg?" Richter said, "If I had known that earlier, I could have gotten in contact with my allies there to arrange a meeting with her…Alas, such is life. What is she doing there?"

"It is irrelevant to discuss that given our current topic."

Visha rolled her eyes again. Irrelevant to tell Richter…

"To answer the original question…" Zettour gestured over to Lergen, who looked as if the Grim Reaper had his hand on his shoulder. "Our Secretary-General has a key detail to address."

But before Lergen could speak, there was a sudden knock on the door. It was Zettour's head butler bringing awareness that the last guest had finally arrived.

"Hold that thought, dear friend," the retired general said, getting out of his seat to walk towards the front door. Gesturing to his butler to let the guest in "Let us make ourselves presentable."

"Alan Foerster." Serebryakov said his name with a hint of suspicion. From the looks of the man, he was nothing how she envisioned, even with Elena's preliminary description. She was expecting someone…bold. Like Weiss, Neumann, or Koenig; not this unimpressive journalist from the DNVP.

What is he even doing here?

"That's me." He laughed awkwardly, taking his spot next to Lergen. "Now, I can tell why everyone here is wondering why I got the invitation…it's because of an extraordinary incident in Pullska."

"Extraordinary?" Herr Class repeated quite sternly, "And you dare hide this important information from being published in our newspaper? It could have increased the sales and the membership of our party!"

Foerster blushed with embarrassment. "Yes, well, it is because Degurechaff herself was insistent that I keep it a secret from my workplace. Hence why I came to the DDP instead, to find Degurechaff's allies and made contact with Frauline Muller here."

"So what is it?" the Tsar-in-exile asked innocently. "Did she embarrass herself?"

"No. you see…she was attacked."

The time froze to a standstill in the room. Everyone looked at Foerster with piqued interest.

"By Judeans. It was an assassination attempt."

Again, silence.

"The Judeans coordinated an assassination on Tanya von Degurechaff when she was traveling with me in Konigsberg. They were following us as we walked the streets before attacking her."

If looks could kill, Serebryakov's face would have made the entire black soil of Kieva barren and salted.

"This cannot go unanswered…" Class remarked, his rage replaced with a cold calculating fury. "Her honor must be avenged."

"Indeed." Goering huffed, "It seems we were right all along. We can't really trust them. Our beloved war hero offers them an olive branch and they repay her with a dagger to the back."

"It was a knife to her face…" Foerster quickly corrected.

"Word will spread eventually." Henning Muller stated, "Even Judeans have loose tongues; the assassins cannot keep this hidden forever. We'll need to control the narrative to prevent unwanted conclusions drawn from this attack."

"We must pay blood for blood." Serebryakov whispered. To think she was this close to losing her golden sun to the enemy.

"Wait, wait… some details are missing." Heydryck held up his hands. "Herr Foerster, was Degurechaff injured in any capacity?"

"No. Her strength remains unmatched." The journalist quickly shook his head. "If anything, she had expressed forgiveness towards her attackers."

"Why is that?" Richter said, looking at Tanya's subordinates. "It seems…so unlike her to let her enemies live. Did she always have this soft side?"

Weiss, Neumann, and Koenig gave conflicting answers if their words could be considered answers, as they too were at a loss of words regarding their leader's attitudes towards her attackers.

"No-no…" Weiss looked as if he had a mouth full of lemon juice. "She wouldn't."

"After everything?" Neumann dithered, "I feel that makes it the most unbelievable story you could have told me."

"I don't think so either." Konig remarked, "No one threatens the Major and gets to walk away alive. I mean, Visha, you saw how she fights."

Serebryakov felt torn. On one hand, the mercy Tanya had given to the Judeans was evidence of her good nature; evidence that war and bloodlust had not conquered her mind. If Degurechaff can find peace with her assassins then perhaps…

No. The Bolsheviks are the eternal enemy. They seek nothing but the complete obliteration of God and Rus; their federation is a twisted blasphemous mockery of the egalitarian, meritocratic institutions of the Empire. There can never be peace in Europe as long as the Bolsheviks and their Judean puppet masters exist.

"How generous for Degurechaff to turn the other cheek to the Judeans," Richter said, looking around the room. "However, I believe that we do not subscribe to such pleasantry here."

Goering, Zettour, and Class were eager for blood; Il'in and Elena wore a smug grin on their faces; Romanovy and Lergen looked downcast at Richter's words; Heydryck and Muller were deep in contemplation; Neumann, Koenig, and Weiss were more hesitant and looked to Serebryakov for guidance.

"A measured response is still required…" she said slowly. God, showing restraint towards the great enemy of Holy Rus was such a foreign feeling. "Just because they failed once does not mean they won't still consider trying again."

Richter nodded in agreement.

"The Judenvolk are a clever, crafty people - no doubt they have schemed a thousand and one plots to remove her from the political scene." He concluded.

"But why?" Weiss looked around the room. "It doesn't make any sense that she was attacked in the first place. The DDP is a party of Judeans - her rhetoric appeals to Judeans…"

"She even worked with Judeans to take down Bolshevik scum." Heydryck commented.

"Control," Serebryakov stated as scorn crept over her face. A poisonous look infected the expressions of her party comrades. "The Judenvolk only want to exert power over the Empire - they see our leader merely as a little doll to manipulate and control. Fortunately for all our sakes, she bows to no master but God himself."

"But what would they promise her?" the exiled Romanovy inquired, "From the looks of it, Degurechaff got everything she wanted - save for the war's end. I doubt she even fears death."

"It's simple isn't it?" Class interjected. "Everything. The Judeans would have promised her everything: money, power, glory - everything and anything to reduce her to becoming their mindless slave. For all the faults I have with her, at least I can appreciate her independent mind and call to action."

Zettour shared a smile with that sentiment, sharing a toast with Herr Class. Only Secretary-General Lergen had the polar opposite reaction. Like a pebble causing an avalanche, he stood up with great indignation and horror as he looked straight at Serebryakov, occasionally glaring at Goering, the Mullers, and finally, Zettour.

This prompted Elena to quickly turn her head and gesture to the typist to pause his transcription. Thank God for such loyal, docile men.

"ENOUGH!" Lergen was on the cusp of shouting his lungs out. "Enough of this - ugh! This is entirely contradictory to Degurechaff's rhetoric and personality. She would not approve of this discussion! I know of it! She approached me - I…I have been directly assured, by the Ace of Aces herself, that she denounced this rhetoric, denounced this slanderous talk towards…towards the Judeans. She told me - SHE told me - that there is no Judean conspiracy plotting the downfall of a liberal, democratic Europe, that there is no treachery, no 'Stab-in-the-back', by the Judeans. She stated that the war was lost on our…our merit, our own shortsightedness; our very ego blinding us from the reality of the Great War! If Degurechaff were here, she would denounce the anti-semitic rhetoric you all have been spewing!"

Despite the outburst, the glare from Serebryakov was enough to reduce the Secretary-General into a stone-cold giant and despite his efforts to remain unreadable, a flash of fear was seen across his face. Anger was what Lergen expected, the hatred he could prepare for, but a soft, delicate smile terrified the man. For in her eyes, Lergen can see the Devil herself staring back.

"And Degurechaff will continue to denounce anti-semitism." Serebryakov stated, her sly smile unwavering.

For a moment, the room fell silent again as slowly but surely, Lergen buried his face into his hands, his eyes wider than his dinner plate, as his mind reached the same conclusion as hers. It was rather…cute watching a grown man struggle to stay coherent, tearing into his own face as he was forced to reconcile the reality of Tanya's movement. In a way, Lergen felt like he shouldn't be surprised: He knew that Degurechaff was a great deceiver but he had never expected that the wool was pulled over his eyes.

Maybe it was because he desperately wanted her to find a safe and secure future in the Germanian Democratic Party, away from the trenches and gunshots and therefore he still had some glimmer of hope that Tanya was telling him the truth. But for a child who was given guns for toys, grenades for dolls, and a uniform as a dress, it was only natural for Degurechaff to kill and only kill. Like a starving lioness led by the scent of blood, it was a matter of time before the hunters used the Judeans as bait.

Despite his efforts to calm himself down, Lergen got up from his seat with great effort and Serebryakov watched him excuse himself from the table to look for a balcony.

"I will accompany him." Zettour said, getting up from his chair as well, "It must be the stress of the revelations he has yet to share from the Ministry of Defence."

Meanwhile, Heydryck felt the urge to speak up for Lergen but thought better of it when he saw Elena's staring daggers at him. His mouth was quickly shut as he resumed deep contemplation. Goering wore the same expression.

"Can I leave too?" asked Nikolas Romanovy.

"Absolutely not." Serebryakov snapped.

"What the Tsar means to say…" Il'in spoke up, "Perhaps we should have a small break first before we continue with the main discussions. I am sure we can smell the food in the other room, hmm?"

"Very well." She conceded, "How does 10 minutes sound?"

"Sounds quite lovely." Herr Muller nodded, vacating his seat to pick out meat and vegetables from the buffet.

He was quickly followed by everyone else in the room save for Elena and Visha. With the two women alone, the White Russy turned to her former roommate with a request.

"Put his name on the list." She demanded. "I fear his talents could not compensate for the liability he brings to Tanya's vision."

Elena raised an eyebrow in fascination.

"I can but there is no guarantee I would have an opportunity to arrange for a more intimate encounter so long as he has the Kaiserin's favor. She'll ask questions. Too many questions, may I add."

"Do it anyway. His dissension will only threaten the unity of our movement." Visha insisted before exiting the room. "No loose ends."

With her gone, Elena took out her small notebook, making sure she was the last person in the room, and added the latest suspect to the list of future terminations that the White Russy commanded.

Erich von Lergen ~

She paused, briefly ruminating, before writing another name on the book.

Viktoriya Ivanovna Serebryakov ~

"You seem to have a lot on your mind, Heydryck." Goering stated the obvious as he grabbed a plate of roasted tomatoes and sausages before moving on to load it with bacon and lettuce. "Care to share?"

Heydryck, in comparison, kept his servings small. He kept an eye out to see Serebryakov escorting Grand Duke Romanovy to a separate room. No doubt to torment him with a thousand questions or praises. The Mullers were conversing amongst each other, speaking in hushed tones.

Sensing it was safe enough to converse, the blonde giant turned to the Junkers' lapdog.

"I feel…slightly confused with the direction of this meeting concerning the Judenvolk."

"Likewise." Goering muttered, "Forgiveness, pah! What is she thinking? Showing mercy to those rabble-rousers? Their minds are dull and their senses soft…they can't comprehend how lucky they are."

"Can't or won't?" Heydryck questioned sarcastically.

"Excuse me?"

"I worked with the Judeans in Kassel, talked among them, even trained a militia with members of their community there for a brief time as Herr Muller worked to uncover the Bolshevik plot."

"So you did," Goering remarked, crunching on his bacon. "And what did you discover after ingraining yourself with them?"

"That they are smart - smarter than I realized; highly intelligent in many instances. Give them a gun and they will form an army, give them leadership and they will form a nation. A dumb Judean we can predict, a dumb Judean we can destroy. But as far as I have seen, there were no dumb Judeans in Kassel."

"So they're organized and well-armed? That explains why my Freikorps are experiencing so much difficulty engaging against Judeans on the streets recently." Goering grumbled. "Did you at least find anything incriminating?"

Heydryck simply gave a sly smile. "No. Whatever plots they have concocted, they hid it well. Granted, I may have been distracted talking with their rabbi concerning communist movements in the city."

"Degurechaff is playing a dangerous game if these Judeans are as intelligent as you say they are. Give them the slightest chance and the Judenvolk will turn those guns against Germania and her people."

"Hence why they have to resort to assassinations. They know they can never hope to defeat the Ace of Aces in open combat. The fact that these 'puppetmasters' approach Tanya first demonstrates their initial respect for her."

Goering grunted, seemingly dissatisfied with Heydryck's answer.

"What is her stance on the Judean Question exactly? Serebryakov says it is one thing, and now Zettour says it is another. What about you? What is her view on the Judeans? Did she ever tell you?"

"Yes. She did." Heydryck murmured, feeling the phantom pain in his groin returning. "I believe…that in her crusade, she is willing to ally with anyone who can take up arms against Bolshevism and the Francois. Entertaining the idea of a Judean cabal threatens unity in her grand coalition, even if her enemies and current allies are the same people."

"Do you think that she would still be inclined to continue this partnership with the Judeans?"

"If what Foerster said was true, then yes, I believe she would. However, if these assassins and plots persist, then it will surely end one way or another."

"You seem rather displeased, perhaps sympathetic, for the Judeans." Goering smirked.

"What are you insinuating, Herr Goering?" Heydryck shot back. "The Judenvolk were allowed the opportunity to become something greater, to become part of Germanian society as loyal and true citizens only to spit on that offer by that attempt on her life. She may grant them forgiveness but I doubt it was given freely."

"So you say," Goering hummed, "If the Argent Silver chose to retaliate, how long would it take, shall we say, for all the Judenvolk to witness her wrath?"

Heydryck nibbled on a piece of garlic bread as he considered his words.

"In truth?" he answered, "Since it is not the question of if Tanya 'could' clean the streets of Europe but 'when'…it could take - dare I say - four or six years. Optimistically."

"Sir," said the head butler, "There is a phone call asking for you."

"Is it from Rudensdorf?" Zettour asked, turning his head to meet his employee.

"No sir."

"Then hang up."

"But sir-"

"Remember that this lunch gathering does not exist." the Junker reminded his staff member. "The only calls I would answer today are from either Rudensdorf or Degurechaff; if she calls, which she won't. So hang up immediately."

"Right away sir." the head nodded, leaving the Preussian Junker to catch up to his friend.

"Deep breaths, my friend, take deep breaths." Hans von Zettour advised as he followed Erich von Lergen towards the balcony. "Perhaps you would like a cigar to calm the nerves?"

"Cigar?" Lergen repeated, quickly turning around to see his associate offer him a single roll. How the elder veteran could be so accepting of the words being said back in that dining room was maddening. Hilarious even if the bespectacled man had the stomach to laugh. But there was only an empty pit in his belly that the Secretary-General felt. "No, I don't think so."

Both men soon leaned against the railing as they turned to gaze upon the trees that decorated Zettour's estate. While Lergen turned his eyes on the little birds making nests among the branches, Zettour looked up to stare at the clouds overhead as he lit a cigar to smoke.

"You are awfully calm about this." Lergen spoke up suddenly. "Are you not concerned with Degurechaff retaliating against us for defying her warning?"

"What do you possibly mean?" Zettour huffed, "We practically raised her to adulthood; we are her fathers in all but name and blood. She would be nothing without us. That is the reality."

"And if that reality is contrary?"

"She will line us up against the wall together with Rudensdorf and shoot us herself."

"And that doesn't scare you?"

"No, it doesn't because it would be an extremely foolish thing to do. She cannot hope to rule Germania of her own volition. She needs us to help govern, to help lead the nation to victory."

"That's what the Kaiser thought too, right up until you made him into a figurehead." Lergen snorted despite knowing that Rudensdorf's junta benefitted him as well. The Secretary-General hated how he let himself become a political animal during the dictatorship.

"Tanya thinks she knows more but we have seen more," Zettour replied, with more bite in his words. "She is a prophet, no doubt about it, but a prophet must be correct all the time, or else…I can only hope that when the Social Democrats implement her economic reforms, it works as intended."

For a moment, the men grew silent in each other's company, pondering what the future might bring.

"I am not scared of Tanya." Zettour ruefully remarked, "I am scared for her."

"For her?" The Secretary-General was mildly surprised. "Why?"

"It's the company she keeps."

"Who? Serebryakov?"

"No, Frauline Muller."

"Should I know her?" Lergen immediately regretted that question when Zettour turned to him with naked fear in his eyes.

"No, but she should know you…I would have never allowed Tanya or Serebryakov to be in the same room as Muller. Even if she was Rudensdorf's greatest asset in maintaining stability on the Home Front."

"Pardon me but I fail to see how Muller can be more terrifying than the Argent Silver."

Lergen wanted to laugh, but to see his ally so stoned-face killed that urge.

"Three years into the Great War, Muller's father reported his Judean wife went missing following a bread riot. Granted, she was participating in that bread riot to protest about the food shortages, but as far as the police records go no one was shot - everyone that was arrested had been accounted for - but she had disappeared. Rudensdorf had expressed his condolences, but the messenger reported how nonchalant he was with the letter."

"And her father?"

"He disappeared as well shortly before the war ended - Muller claimed he died in a burglary incident but there was no official police report on that affair either."

"So what happened?"

"Knowing her handiwork and her mother's flirtation with Bolshevik ideology, Elena Muller must have tortured her mother over a five-year period before discreetly disposing of the body in a lake or river. I express no doubt her father met a similar fate given his backing of the Social Democrats." Zettour explained, "Do you understand the kind of woman that Tanya is getting in bed with? She is letting someone who killed her parents with her own hands become part of her inner circle."

"Why didn't you tell her?" Lergen asked, shocked.

"Because if I did, it wouldn't change a thing. Right now, Muller is too useful and has too many connections to be gotten rid of. Informing Degurechaff about her clandestine suppression activities will only paint a target on my back."

"Won't Degurechaff find out on her own?"

"Would she even care when she does?" Zettour answered. "She's an orphan after all."

'She doesn't know the warmth of a mother, the joy of a father, or the protection of a safe and prosperous home. She is a child born for war and conquest.'

Author's Note: Sorry for the delay. Schedules have been busier as of late for everyone involved.

Chapter Thirteen: The First Heads of Hydra Part 2

Tzarism has always primarily relied upon two things: nationalist loyalties toward the Motherland and the politicization of Christian Orthodoxy to sway the masses into slavish obedience to the government, isolating any dissenting ideology through the sound of Gregorian chants and prayers. Unfortunately, the downfall of Tzar Nikolas II revealed that a third component needed to ensure the supremacy of the autocrats: competent leadership, whether from the head of state himself or his ministers.

A fact that Nikolas Vladimirovich Romanovy knew all too well as his status as exile demonstrates the consequences of ineptitude. The truth is, he disliked the institutions his family had relied so much upon. Nikolas hated the previous Tzar for not abdicating when he had the chance, he hated that he inherited that legacy of incompetence and corruption, and most importantly, he hated that he had no choice in the matter.

The political arena was less of a discourse in Parisee and more of a shooting gallery in Tokyo.

The men that Grand Duke Nikolas would much prefer were all outside of Germania: Kerenski, Miliukov, and even Basil Shul. Instead, all he had around him were power-hungry sycophants. Warmongers and worse. Their hatred of liberalism, cosmopolitanism, and Judeans built iron bars around him and his family. How he longed to escape the prison they built around him and live the rest of his days in Parisee. Yet, for all their flaws, they kept him protected.

Given his status as the heir to the throne of Rus, it doesn't take a Tischler to discern that the Bolsheviks wanted him dead as well. To deny the Counterrevolutionaries and other White Russy emigres a figurehead to rally.

Perhaps it was why he was compelled to stay. In a way, Nikolas envied the Empire for giving his people what Tzar Nikolas II could not. The results spoke for themselves! The first generation of Russy Emigres was forged through the fires of war and came out as tough as iron.

But not steel. Not steel like Tanya von Degurechaff.

For the iron that does not bend shall break.

And the Grand Duke wondered as he sat in a luxurious chair in the house belonging to the Preussian that formed the Duumvirate, glaring at the brown-haired, blue-eyed ariel mage, Viktoryia Ivanovna Serebryakov. By all accounts, she was the second most powerful mage in the entire world, courtesy of being groomed by Degurechaff herself.

Romanovy shifted uncomfortably in his seat as his mind contemplated the implications of a child enforcing Preussian discipline to an adult.

He never met the Devil of the Rhine, the Ace of Aces, and quite frankly, Nikolas prefers to keep it that way. If Serebryakov is what is to be considered a great political and military asset to the monarchist cause, he felt unsafe being so close to Degurechaff's vicinity.

Judging the direction of the conversation Serebryakov has with Il'in and Richter, he will eventually face the Devil herself once she comes back from Pullska. Hopefully, she would be in an amicable mood. Then again, if Serebyrakov was so enthusiastic on the topic of smashing Communist skulls and breaking Judean fingers, a happy Tanya von Degurechaff may be more terrifying than it sounds. Curiously enough, the mere mention of the name was enough to reduce this proud, hateful revanchist into a shameless queer bootlicker.

Just smile, Nikolas. Just smile and nod. This will all be behind you.

Words to live by.

"Shall we resume the meeting?" Nikolas asked, putting up the most natural smile he could muster. He found himself wanting to put an end to the words being spoken even after learning to tune out the conversation in front of him.

Despite the innocent question, the White Russy mage simply glared at him. Almost offended by his voice.

"Very well, let us try out the food and wine being served." Serebryakov suggested.

While not terribly hungry, the Grand Duke had the perfect excuse to get out of the room and away from his admirer.

"I feel we should have accompanied the Major to Konigsberg." Weiss muttered to Neumann, staking his plate with roasted tomatoes and bratwurst. "Without a computation orb, I fear that her assassins would just need to get lucky once."

"If it's such a necessity, why haven't you given one to her?" Neumann replied, mixing some wine with the beer in his glass mug.

"Why haven't you?" the vice commander answered.

"Indeed, why haven't any of us? We all know that there are plenty of spares. Civilian or military, it doesn't really matter. The Major is clever enough to turn copper into steel."

"So why haven't we?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." Neumann grunted, downing his mug in one gulp.

"The Francois?" Weiss suggested.

"There's your answer. The fucking Francois. We can go with that."

"You say as if you have alternatives."

"Come on, those pigs in Parisee fear the Major more than they fear Hell. Give her a computation orb and those bastards will place down another series of sanctions to grab that device out of her hands." Neumann explained, already pouring another concoction of alcohol. "Assuming they don't march into Berun to arrest Degurechaff first. We all know how pigs enjoy their women in bondage."

"Uh, don't remind me. Their occupation of Brussels was bad enough." Weiss hummed. "Just...what kind of men are we? I mean, we broke laws in Arene under the Major but here we follow the laws enacted by the Francois. Disarming the Major is their utmost priority. "

"That amendment hasn't been written yet."

"Yet - of course, following the spirit of Triano. Doesn't that make us hypocrites in our nationalism? Our loyalty to the Major?"

"What are you getting at?" Neumann furrowed his brow.

"Which side are we truly on?" Weiss replied. "Germania or Francia?"

"Germania, of course."

"And yet we did not grant Germania's greatest hero the tool she needs to engage with her foes."

"Because she doesn't need to use such pristine equipment to clear out the trash in her home - listen, Weiss, you need not fret over the law, written or spiritual. These contradictions happen all the time. Just focus on serving the Major and all will be fine. We are her lifeguards after all."

"But -"

"We're not lawyers." Neumann continued, "Don't be scared of the Francois telling us what is lawful or unlawful when we have rifles at our sides. We are not pigs, after all."

"I suppose that you are right on that but what if the Reichstag call for the Major's arrest or if she gets attacked again but they do not step in to protect her? She would still not have a computation orb by her side." Weiss said.

"Then we'll just have to fucking give her one when that time comes! Hmph. Who cares what the Sozis in the Reichstag think? They'll be out of the picture come November. And for them to get to the Major, they will have to go through us."

"With that body type, you'll be bulletproof." Weiss remarked.

"Fuck off." Neumann chuckled, suppressing his giggle with a sip of mixed beer before suddenly turning serious. "But let us be absolutely clear on one thing: the Major has not met a single person or creature she cannot kill, we are there simply to make sure to subdue any attacker before she delivers her judgment."

"But her assassin in Konigsberg…"

"Is either the luckiest or unluckiest man in history, so long as he lives."

Weiss simply nodded, albeit awkwardly before speaking up once again.

"Want to go to the theatre afterward? I heard they're re-releasing Metropolis with sound."

"Really? Hell yeah, I'm up for it. We should bring Koenig along too."

The starving masses cling to Degurechaff, the humiliated army salutes Degurechaff, and the pathetic intellectuals admire Degurechaff. Yet how many Germanians would continue to recognize that it was men who built this country? While Heinrich Class may not say he is the next Bismarck or Frederick der Grosse, he is the proud founder of the Germanian Association, co-founder of the Germanian Fatherland Party, and an invaluable president of the Pan-Germanian League, purging the League of any Judean influence.

To think he was once against the conscription of women into the armed forces - after all, war was a career for real men, not for delicate, hysterical females - Degurechaff had shattered his expectations in all the right ways in all the wrong situations. If Degurechaff was simply born a man, perhaps Class would have thought very differently of Germania's golden child.

Unlike Serebyrakov and Frauline Muller, such women need a husband with soft words and a harsh hand to keep them domesticated. Seriously, why did Degurechaff pick them as her political advisors? Wouldn't she want experienced men at her side? Men with credentials. It befuddles Class that the Ace of Aces put such trust in these women. No matter how much they copy the mannerisms of the Imperial Army, their fragile feminity leaks through.

And the men that follow Degurechaff.

Such submissive slobs. He expected better of the youth of rank and talent.

"Herr Class!" Koenig called out to the politician, causing the old man to break out of his brooding session. "Enjoying the food? The ham and turkey are worth trying out."

"Yes." Class replied, yet he could not conceal the displeasure and uncertainty in his voice. Truly, the meat served was delicious and pungent with an earthy taste.

"Shame our first encounter was so…confrontational. My apology." Koenig said in a tone that did not suggest an apology at all. "Do you accept my apology?"

Again, the young man presented no room for rejection. Especially since he knows where the politician lives and operates. Worrying still was how quickly his bodyguards turned on him when Koenig brought up Degurechaff's name.

"Yes." What else could he say? Even if Muller was in another room, her eyes and ears seemed to be everywhere.

"Good. I'm glad we can move past those grievances and work towards the future."

"The future…" Class repeated. "What kind of future?"

"All sorts of things." Koenig answered, "I cannot say for sure."

"You're not worried?"

"Worried? Perhaps? Scared? Yes. Excited? Definitely."

"Excited? What can be so exciting when the country is falling apart around our ears?" Class questioned sternly. The folly of youth! "Can't you see there's a crisis going on?"

"Indeed, it is exciting. As the Orientals have said, 'With crisis, comes opportunity.'" Koenig replied, drinking wine straight from the bottle. "Have you seen the new art being presented in Berun?"

"Ugh! Don't remind me. You will never find me near those art galleries." the old man looked away in disgust. "Degenerate. All of it! The artists too, including the Judean ones."

"Don't knock what you haven't tried, Herr Class. You never know what you might like seeing. I recommend visiting the Bauhaus at least once. I heard they're hosting a Dada exhibit."

"Please, cease mentioning the 'artworks' of these Judeo-Bolsheviks around me."

With a sly shrug, Koenig turned away and rejoined his uniformed brothers in their corner of the house.

Dada. What a joke - an international conspiracy to weaken the Germanian psyche and spirit through degenerate art. If there is one thing Class wishes from the leadership of Tanya von

Degurechaff, it is the cleansing of the art world. Avante-Garde is just a euphemism for moral bankruptcy.

"Alright, everyone. Back your seats." Serebryakov announced as she clapped her hands before resuming her seat as head of the table. Her plate was stacked with all manners of meats; turkey legs, bacon, slices of ham, everything that Zettour's chefs had to offer. "Time is of the essence concerning that election is so close to arriving."

One by one, the attendants shuffled back into the seats. Full bellies have made them more or less jovial to continuing this meeting. Thankfully, Lergen returned with Zettour behind him. The typist also returned to his position and made the final preparations to continue his transcription.

Elena Muller was last to return, closing the doors behind her as if she were a jailer in a prison. As she walked to her seat, Muller gave Zettour a soft pat of assurance on the shoulder. Lergen, however, seemed to shudder at the touch.

"I hope you all enjoyed the food provided. It is sure the shake off the memories of the Turnip Winters." Serebryakov raised a toast to Zettour. "Now, let us continue where we left off."

"The assassination?" Goering asked.

"No." Serebryakov shook her head. "We can get to that later. I was referring to Lergen."

Once again, Lergen found himself as the center of attention as everyone looked to him expectedly. A silent conversation took place when the Secretary-General locked eyes with Zettour, half-pleading and half-negotiating, before Lergen finally conceded with a heavy sigh as he pulled out a file from his dossier.

"I just want this to be known - on record - that you are all not my first audience and that this was not my first course of action…" The Secretary-General grumbled, almost with great remorse. Adjusting his glasses, he began to read aloud. "It is to my great regret to reveal that the Reichswehr, the armed forces of the Republic of Germania, has been infiltrated by Communist ideology. The reason why the Rhineland and Westphalia have been occupied by Bolshevik agitators for so long is because…of collusion with foreign and domestic interests. Are you all familiar with the Minister of Defence, Adolf-Frederich von Hammerstein?"

A few murmurs were the response. Unlike most Junkers, Adolf-Frederich von Hammerstein was fairly uncontroversial when it came to opinion and personality. He was the "safest option" for the Weimar Republic.

"Have you heard about his daughter, Mareike von Hammerstein, and her activities?" Lergen asked to members of the meeting.

A round of "no's" came around the table.

"Yes." said Elena, offering a ghost of a smile and a wink to Lergen.

"Well, she is an active member of the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands and the apprentice of the party leader, Comrade Lutzeberg. Given the minister's close familial ties, this is a great violation of conduct and a conflict of interests." He explained.

"Is it really that bad? It's just his daughter after all." Weiss asked, earning him a death glare from the White Russites.

"Many children from the minor nobility sided with the Bolsheviks during the Revolution." Serebryakov spoke with gritted teeth. "It's ironic that they ended up getting purged after they overthrew their parents."

"Why did the children do that?" Heydryck inquired.

"Because they were naive little shits."

"In addition, the Reichswehr has been cooperating with the Soviet Federation, in violation of the Treaty of Triano." Lergen continued, before reluctantly passing the file to Elena to examine closely. "Major General Otto Hassen, a friend of Hammerstein, traveled to Moskva to negotiate with Jughashvili. In return for supporting Soviet industry and allowing for Red commanders to train here, in Germania, the Reichswehr could use Soviet training facilities in Rus. Hammerstein is jeopardizing the integrity of the armed forces by exposing them to indoctrination."

It was a half-truth. The Defense Minister was naive but not stupid enough to allow the entire Reichswehr to turn red underneath his nose nor was he "friends" with Hassen. The circumnavigation of Triano benefitted Germania as a whole, a secret rearmament program that was started by the Junkers as soon as the treaty was signed. Both Lergen and Zettour, despite being anti-Bolshevik Preussians, were grateful for the Soviets being open-minded in assisting Germania despite being foes and starving the Empire not too long ago. Yet, this was too good of political defamation against the SPD regime to pass up.

Reveal the truth and the republican project would come crashing down in an instant, paving the way for the return of the Kaiser.

Or Kaiserin.

Already, Lergen could see Zettour plotting ways to blackmail Herimann and Erbel, Berning, and even Schlage into granting concessions to the Junkers. Concessions that could, by design, damage the democratic process of the republic. Even though none of the leaders of the Progressive Bloc knew of this secret arrangement, the fallout would surely destroy the reputation of the Social Democrats as traitors and sellouts to the Germanian people more than being signatories to Triano. This time, permanently.

Degurechaff would love this.

She is coming back from Pullska only to find the keys to power placed into her hands with Zettour and Rudensdorf behind her, guiding her every step.

"Gentlemen, my ladies. Do you now see the urgency and the need for unity in this meeting?" Hans von Zettour announced. "We are the only ones left to defend the Fatherland and its people. We have to support Degurechaff to preserve whatever integrity we have left in our nation and to reclaim our nation's place in the sun. So do please forgive whatever past transgressions you have with her and focus on the future."

"So if the Reichswehr is too compromised to weed out the Reds, it is up to us then to do it?" Goering questioned.

Zettour nodded.

"There is no one else who can be counted on. Our enemies are everywhere. We must unite under Degurechaff's banner. There is no other alternative."

Weiss immediately began pounding the table with his fist in open agreement, Neumann and Koenig followed suit, and soon enough, almost everyone was banging their hand against the fine oak furniture. Almost everyone except Lergen who hid his displeasure behind a glass of wine.

"What of the Judenvolk?" Foerster piqued up, as soon as the applause died down. "How shall we approach them for harming our war hero?"

"With sticks, stones, and handguns, of course." Class answered, feeling highly annoyed towards his employee by the question. "These are Judeans we are talking about - why am I even telling you this?"

"Handguns?" Weiss repeated, almost alarmed by the implication. "Must we go that far? A few harsh words ought to be enough to let her assassins know that they won't get another chance."

"Ha! Have you been on the streets lately?" Goering spat, "The Judeans are organizing. They are carry revolvers, grenades, rifles, and even fucking machine guns. Words will not affect them."

"Do we have to engage them?" Neumann inquired, "Foerster said that the Major was completely untouched. Her assassins failed to land a single blow against her skin. It still warrants a response, yes, but I say it needs to be a measured response."

"Eye for an eye, as the saying goes." Koenig chirped.

"Measured? Are you suggesting to offer mercy?" Richter retorted, "We're soldiers, most of us anyway, not diplomats or the sort. The fact that the Judeans are arming themselves demonstrates their plot to overthrow the state. They're disloyal."

"They have engaged in violent skirmishes recently against many White exiles," Il'in added. "Judean disarmament is highly unlikely without an overwhelming force, which we currently lack."

"For now." Henning Muller stated. "For now."

"Wait!" Heydryck shouted, perhaps too harshly. "Let us not act too hastily. We must remember that election day is on the horizon and Degurechaff's party is the DDP."

"So?" Goering grumbled, "She should be thanking us for marching to defend her honor."

"Allow me to remind you that dead Judeans don't vote. Dead Judeans don't go to the polls. Dead Judeans don't give donations to Degurechaff's campaign treasury. For every Judean you kill, it will cost the DDP a hundred votes. To suggest otherwise is a fallacy." Heydryck boomed, ignoring Goering's remark. "If we want Degurechaff to fix the country, we need to get her and her movement into the Reichstag and her movement is the DDP. She needs the Judean vote, no question about that."

"Degurechaff has demonstrated a willingness to partake in the electoral process," Lergen spoke up. "Violence will only drive away voters."

"But I agree with Neumann," Romanovy winced, "No one needs to die. Perhaps they could get an arm broken, that's all. Nothing more."

"Break a finger, arm, or leg, whatever method you desire for a measured response. The Judean must be alive and at least cognitive enough and physically able to vote for the DDP." Heydryck replied. "If they do not vote for the DDP, then their loyalties lie elsewhere and therefore can be subjected to further discretion."

"But what of the Judean militias? No doubt they have formed an entire Freikorps…" Serebryakov inquired.

"Perhaps a compromise, may I suggest?" Weiss offered. "Instead of focusing on bringing retaliation -"

"Measured response." Neumann corrected, whispering in Weiss' ear.

"- measured response, right, to the Judean body, could we perhaps target their business ventures instead? A nationwide boycott; for a day or month. That way, Judeans don't get

harmed by our efforts and they still be able to vote for the DDP while we have accomplished the mission of demonstrating public outrage for the harm being brought so close to the war hero."

"And what do you propose to do with the Judean militias?" Class replied. "What's stopping them from forcing Germanians to buy Judean goods and services?"

"We can kill two birds with one stone," Zettour answered. "As for now, we are greatly outnumbered by the Spartakus and the Brownshirts. Without the Reichswehr, we are at a major disadvantage. However, we can employ these Judean groups westward, and convince them to join our crusade against the Reds, leaving their enterprises open to a boycott."

"Will it work?" The Grand Duke Nikolas asked.

"More than likely." Heydryck answered, "Many Germanian Democrat Judeans detest the Bolsheviks and will not hesitant to remove them from their neighborhood."

'Though there are just as many Judeans who would equally side against us.' Went unsaid.

"This is a dangerous gamble, Herr Zettour." Serebyrakov warned, "It is no coincidence that many Judeans inhabit the upper echelons of Communist leadership."

"Which is why it has to work," Zettour said. "Consider this strategy as a test of character, hm? Any Judean who takes part in removing the communist stain from our country with great fervor and enthusiasm has demonstrated loyalty to the Fatherland, not to Moskva. Those who do not, well, the Germanian people will judge them as traitors and enablers."

"It could equalize the numbers." Henning Muller stated. "But should we wait for Degurechaff to return?"

"Why should we?" Zettour challenged, "The way I see it, we have the perfect opportunity to score a major political victory for Degurechaff and Germania. By providing action where the government could not, we can get the DDP to overthrow the SPD through popular support. An early Christmas present for our hero. We can't expect her to do all the work. Not anymore, at least."

"Wouldn't Herr Schlage resist these plans?" Nikolas Romanovy asked quietly.

"Leave him to me." Elena Muller and Hans von Zettour answered simultaneously.

"As for who would be leading the boycott," Serebryakov began, "Herr Goering, Herr Class, would you like the privilege?"

"Why?" Goering asked in an accusatory tone. "You know what our men stand for and how they operate."

"And you are the only ones available that we could count on to keep Rohr in check." Serebryakov reminded him. "Our presence would be notably absent in the cities and rural areas. However temporary, Rohr would be a bigger idiot and a fool if he did not recognize the opportunity to send his Brownshirts northward."

"What about the White Cossacks?" Heydryck addressed Richter and Il'in, "Can we also trust them to watch our rear while we head westward."

"Pardon me, but I would sooner trust an angry Ispagnan bull in a Sinaen shop." Herr Muller stated, "No offense, Serebryakov - Il'in, I know they are your family but these Cossacks are extremely violent and more than likely target our Judean...allies, to put bluntly."

"They are uncouth too." Weiss interjected.

"And vicious drunks to boot." Neumann added.

"But still useful to our cause even though they are just rabid dogs." Koenig stated.

Serebryakov looked ready to strangle all three of her comrades with her bare hands. Of course, they weren't exaggerating; the Tzars held similar opinions towards their primary enforcers. Cossack stormtroopers in the Rhineland, in Norden, and on the Ionzo front were absolute demons against the Francois, Illdoans, Legadonians, and Albish.

"The fanatics we can ship westward." Richter implored. "Their hatred of anti-Bolshevism exceeds all expectations. The ones that can be trusted to show restraint can partake in the boycott."

"May God help the Judeans." Romanovy muttered under his breath. "But how should we justify these actions? No doubt we will be printing these revelations at the same time with our publishers. Yes, Degurechaff has been attacked but that was outside Germania's borders."

"It's simple." Foerster smiled, "The assassination attempt on Degurechaff - the Reichswehr collaboration with the Soviet Rus - we say that it is the same conspiracy. And to placate the Secretary-General's Judean sympathies…"

The journalist mockingly gestured towards Lergen, prompting a few snickering around the table.

"Now that the Judeans have the opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty to the Fatherland, we can shift the focus to denouncing the Republic in its entirety. The Social Democrats and their ilk - they need to be removed, immediately and permanently."

The members around the table found the idea very receptive much to Foerster's satisfaction. He continued with the scheme.

"How about this: we can say that Degurchaff is the whistleblower. Lergen uncovered the treason against the Fatherland and approached the Ace of Aces to be his canary in the coal mine. She goes to Pullska to investigate the conspiracy herself, causing the Bolsheviks and the traitorous SPD to resort to hiring Judeans to assassinate her to keep her silence. Does it work for you all?"

"Perhaps," Goering contemplated, "It does not violate the agreement with Degurechaff."

"Indeed," Class agreed, "How convenient for us to avoid breaching the arrangement by a technicality. "

"Serebryakov, Frauline Muller?" Foerster asked hopefully.

This "truth" conveniently ticked all the right boxes when presented to the masses. Everyone disliked the Russy Federation. Everyone disliked the Social Democrats. Everyone disliked the Judeans, though not as much as some White Emigres would like. But everyone loved Tanya von Degurechaff. To Serebryakov, however, it took too much agency away from the Judenvolk; presenting the narrative that made the puppetmasters into becoming puppets themselves.

On the surface of this, did the Judeans control the Bolsheviks or did the Bolsheviks control the Judeans?

A distinction has to be made for when this lie gets published on the front page of the newspapers, it will become reality. A reality that Serebryakov must live in until her dying breath. She will be repeating this lie; her peers will be repeating this lie; and most importantly, Degurechaff will have to repeat this lie. Will the Major do it?

Tanya von Degurechaff was the most honorable, most integral, most intelligent, and most caring person Serebryakov has ever met. She was the envy of the entire world. The perfect soldier in all of military history: a demon to her enemies but an angel to her allies, a goddess of war and destruction. Victory was just on the horizon waiting to be grabbed under her vision.

So do the Judeans control the Bolsheviks? Under this revision of reality, not anymore. The enemy created a monster that even they could not control.

Like Frankenstein bringing life to his abomination, the Judeans will pay the price for their hubris for once the Bolsheviks and the Socialists are removed, their reckoning will arrive. The boycott was the first of many.

"I find this story more plausible, and therefore more real, to be made unveiled to the public." Elena smiled, "We have to control the narrative, after all."

"Likewise," Her cousin repeated, "Likewise."

"Herr Zettour, Secretary-General?" Foerster looks towards the Preussians.

"I see no issue with this new understanding." the elder general replied.

"I feel this is the best possible outcome for everyone involved," Lergen answered glumly. "But we must remember that -"

"Yes. Yes." Richter interrupted, dismissing the concerns with a wave of his hand. "Don't kill the Judeans. Degurechaff needs them alive. Keep our guns aimed at Rohr's stormtroopers. We know. We understand."

"Since we now have our justification and strategy, let's discuss the method." Elena Muller announced, sarcasm and scorn dripping in every letter. "Given the current constraints, it is rather unfortunate that I cannot employ my skills to their full extent."

Lergen shifted uneasily in his seat. Is murder the only solution she knows?

"How do we incentivize the Judeans to vote for the DDP during the boycott?" Muller continued innocently as if she was just an idealistic woman entering politics for the first time. "How do we ensure that they will still be incentivized to vote after the boycott?"

"Cut the act." Goering sneered, "We're the ones doing the boycott. Not you. The Judeans will vote for Degurechaff in a heartbeat. Hell, this will be the only opportunity that we can be on common ground with Rohr. Invite him to partake in the boycott and we won't have to worry about his thugs usurping your strongholds since he would be too busy breaking windows and tearing down doors. Bring him into this alliance as the monster for Degurechaff to slay and her victory is assured."

"That does not sound like a good idea…" Romanovy spoke up.

"Is it any worse than relying on Cossacks?" Koenig argued.

"Resistance will inevitably occur." Heydryck pointed out.

"Any Judean that resists will be shot." Class state. "Our Freikorps will claim self-defense."

"Firing upon civilians trying to protect their property and business is self-defense?" Lergen questioned, feeling quite incredulous.

"It is preemptive self-defense," Richter answered with a straight face. "You should know. It's the same excuse the Francois scum pulled on us."

"Should we bring bricks or torches?" Il'in inquired.

"Bricks if they accept the ultimatum to leave their house and shop," Goering said. "Torches if they do not."

"Do you still plan to bring torches after using bricks?" Herr Muller questioned.

"Obviously." The former fighter ace nodded. "Torches are good for light and intimidation."

"Just don't burn the people you are trying to intimidate," Weiss warned.

"Don't worry. The smoke will drive them out."

"Can I say something?" Lergen protested. "Is there no other way we can articulate our frustration towards the current circumstances our nation has found itself in? No way to articulate our worry for Degurechaff's health?"

"We intend to articulate our disdain towards the Social Democrats and Judean involvement in the most unambiguous terms possible. Twice." Serebryakov spoke callously, her words made of solid, scarred iron, iron that showed cold determination and cruel intent. "One to demonstrate what happens to them if they continue to bring harm to Germania and our beloved champion and the second to demonstrate what will become of them if they do not support her ascension."

"Twice?" The Secretary-General grew suddenly alarmed. "What do you mean 'twice?'"

"I believe that is out of the scope of our current discussion, Herr Lergen." The White Russy said in a tone that left no room for further argument, a tone that threatened knives and other pointy invasive instruments. Richter and Il'in nodded in agreement before turning to berate the Secretary-General.

"My friends," Zettour spoke up, attempting to calm the room. "Please pardon him. He just wants us to operate in the purview of Argent Silver's interests which I believe we are trying to accomplish to an extent. Let us put the good of the nation above our interests. Once the Judeans see the error of their ways, they will come to be loyal again. And they will."

"They have to." Elena pointed out.

"Those that don't are beyond reason and therefore, beyond saving?" Neumann inquired cautiously.

Zettour nodded.

"We tolerated revolution and treason long enough. It is time for adults to discipline their children."

"I hope this boycott will be enough," Romanovy commented. "So we may not need another."

"So we agree with the method?" Serebyrakov asked, raising her hand as she scanned the room.

Skepticism and restraint gave way to fear. Fear of retaliation as Serebryakov's expression demanded unanimous consent. Everyone else followed her example, though no one shared the same level of enthusiasm, including Lergen; his hand was last raised.

"Take pride, Secretary-General," she stated. "History will vindicate us."

"Since there is no other dissenting voice," Elena glared at Lergen, "We can set the date for the boycott and the operations in the West before we conclude this meeting."

"Despite how fast news would spread, it will still take time to organize an army. Much less a boycott. November is the earliest we can do both." Heydryck contemplated. "If we publish this news now, in October, it will only cause hysteria as well as give the SPD enough time to deflect all criticism."

"The federal election will only be days off by then," Weiss said. "Will we even be ready?"

"We will." Serebryakov. "We can't afford to disappoint our great leader with sloppy timetables."

"So what is the date?" Goering demanded.

"The remainder of October till the first day of November shall be spent organizing our forces. We need not to tell our soldiers the full story yet. Secrecy is of utmost importance at this time to prevent the Judeans from realizing our actions." Elena explains. "As for the day of action, I selected November 6th when we publicized the news to the wider nation. A five-day window of error for any last-minute adjustments."

"The 6th?" Class repeated. "That's only three days off before the voting booths open."

"Exactly." she winked. "November 6th will be the day the boycott and our cleaning operations in Rhineland and Westphalia begin. The speed of our Freikorps will be paramount in demolishing communist resistance in one fell swoop. Our victory against the Reds and the revelation of Communist involvement in the government will catapult Degurechaff into her office."

"And host an imperial referendum." Class reminded the women. "To bring back the Kaiser."

"Kaiserin." Serebyrakov whispered harshly.

Lergen looked ready to speak again but was quickly silent when Elena continued talking.

"Do not worry of friendly fire, Secretary-General. I have already procured a list - 6,000 names long - of selected individuals of noteworthy status in the KPD who need permanent retirement from politics. Joining the DDP has made the process of identification easier."

"How?" Lergen asked quietly.

"I never got rid of my files since the war ended," she replied with great pride in her voice.

So that's why the SPD was so adamant about tearing down Rudensdorf's spy ring after the War's end.

There was too much confidential knowledge in the hands of a rogue agent.
Lergen paled at the thought.

And now she works for Degurechaff; knowing the Devil, the Reichstag will be noticeably vacant once Muller is given free rein to enact.

"It will be retirement, right?" He pressed forward. "As in they will be alive at the end?"

"Alive long enough," Elena assures.

"Would Degurechaff even appreciate the foresight?" The Secretary-General stood up from his seat once more, setting all eyes on him again. The typist in the corner immediately paused his recording following another gesture by Elena.

"Deal with the reality of your party leader! Whatever-whatever headline you decide to publish in November, it will not stay confined in our borders. Lothiern, Daneland, Pullska, everyone will read the headline - including Degurechaff - and she will not like this. She does not entertain conspiratorial talk. I know her!"

"What do you know of the Major?!" Serebyrakov spat viciously. "You weren't there in the Rhineland, in Norden, in Dacia, in Western Rus, in Flanders, and in the Alps! You weren't there dodging bullets and parrying bayonets by thousands of mages that wish to rip out your organs. You didn't go to bed at night wishing to see sunrise tomorrow. You didn't find yourself mixed in the piss, shit, and mud when stationed in the trench! You didn't find yourself stripped naked and showered in freezing water before being locked in a dark room for hours without end!"

Neumann, Weiss, and Koenig looked thoughtfully at the White Russy as her last words reminded them of the nightmare that was Tanya's training regime. Memories that are best left buried.

"You do not know what you are talking about!" Lergen shouted back, "You are putting words into her mouth!"

"I could say the same thing about you!" she roared. "I DO KNOW-"

"Silence! Both of you." Zettour's voice was thunderous. "Let us not devolve into senseless bickering. Especially you, Serebryakov, control yourself."

One of Visha's eyes twitched in agitation at his scolding while the transcriber resumed his duty.

"Let us be absolutely clear on one thing and one thing only." the Junker stated with steel in his words. "Together, We Dictate Reality. The words that will come from our newspapers will be the new reality that Germania faces to our great political advantage. Push aside your thoughts on what Degurechaff is or isn't. I will speak to her to ensure that she sees the benefits of our decision."

"When the time comes," he continued, "Our political parties, whether DNVP or DDP, all of them, will merge into one political organization. White Russites, Germanians, everyone will march under Degurechaff's banner. Just for everyone here to be notified early."

"And if we refuse?" Goering challenged.

"The only human institution that rejects progress is the cemetery," Elena replied with a soft smile. "I recommend you to not refuse our destiny."

"So we agree?" Zettour asked, leaving no other room for argument. "Any other suggestions?"

"No."

"I see no problem."

"We can proceed."

"Let us just end this council."

"As long as it works as intended."

"Very well." The retired general smiled. "I can safely say our meeting has been concluded and its results…very successful."

Chapter Fourteen: There Were Four Wise Monkeys

"The men should stand trial," I demanded Pilsud, even though I questioned if the world had gone insane instead of either of us. I can't let him defame these politicians; it would give unwanted ideas to the extremists in Germania.

It was also maddening how easy it was for the Field Marshal to consolidate his power. When the election was delayed indefinitely until "national healing" had been completed, the people barely protested.

One thousand soldiers had died in a skirmish between Pilsud's men and those loyal to the Socialist regime. Not everyone in the Army was quick to side with the "Sanation Forces," but not enough remained to withstand the coup. Granted, the week of negotiating, plus Pilsud abusing my public reputation, ensured that the remaining federal soldiers endorsed the new government set up in place.

The old field marshal was clever: already recycling old Imperial propaganda posters of my face and adjusting a few words made my name inseparable from the ecstasy of overthrowing a profoundly unpopular regime. Denouncing him would have portrayed me as a power-hungry hypocrite trying to usurp power for ill intent.

It was insanity.

It was insanity to see that the crowds still cheering for my name and condemning Moscic and his peers. How the newspapers quickly changed their rhetoric to describe the situation as a "liberation from a nightmare." Even worse still, the Socialist Party agreed to endorse Pilsud's Government of Sanation. The fact that they implored me to stay in Warschau in early November nearly made my head explode.

Even a letter from Lergen from a few days ago did not give me the reprieve I had initially hoped for. While I appreciated his firm support of my movement and ideals, he only believed in me. I certainly did not like how he disparaged Visha's Russy heritage or attacked Elena's parentage. While I admit that my partner and subordinate had few opportunities to obtain leadership, it was almost misogynistic and racist for my taste as to how he addressed his grievances. I expected better given his titles and our relationship.

But talking to Pilsud after his ascension? That made me wish I had jumped onto the first train back to Berun when I had the chance.

"My dear Tanya, I'm happy you decided to stay." Pilsud treated me as if I were his great-granddaughter of six and not an adult woman. Snatching his cigar out of his mouth and smashing it against his wooden desk was not enough to scare the condescending tone out of his mouth. "The putsch was to remove them from office, not convict them. I am not criminalizing them, only denying them future participation in Pullskan politics."

"Could you at least allow them to speak for themselves?" I inquired, "At least allow them to return to civilian life with their honor intact. Can't you at least be concerned for their safety outside civil service?"

"Degurechaff," Pilsud answered, ignoring my questions. "Must I explain to you the dangers of allowing your political opponents to use their trial as a platform of martyrdom?"

I held back my tongue from a violent retort. I knew exactly what he was referring to. Imperial Japan had no shortage of ultranationalist freaks committing assassinations in broad daylight and allowing themselves to be arrested. The toxic fascist euphoria permeated society when they took advantage of sympathetic judges to present their actions as noble and just, causing the newspapers to publish their right-wing garbage for the public to read. Invoking the name of the Emperor was enough to get a light sentence or even no sentence at all; such was the power of the Imperial cult.

But this was different.

Moscic was no extremist, nor was he a terrorist of any sort. He was nothing like Himmler or Goering or Hitler himself. If anything, his worst crime was having his name on a list of candidates for the Francois to choose from. The man was simply given too many burdens to resolve quickly. If things were different, perhaps his legacy was not in tatters.

"Since I cannot stop you from visiting Moscic, why don't you ask him why he sold us out to the Francois?" The field marshal smiled, "Truth be told, I wish I could accompany you to personally deliver the news that Pullska will be seeking a new alternative away from the Little Entente. Perhaps I just would."

Immediately, I held back my tongue once more to avoid screaming my lungs out at his face. Given that a putsch was conducted, it was more surprising that Pullska wasn't kicked out sooner like Magyarozag. Its newfound status as a neutral state would have been harmless if it weren't for the fact that the RUSSY FEDERATION is its immediate neighbor.

"I find it highly optimistic that a departure from the Little Entente is preferable to an immediate Soviet invasion," I spoke through gritted teeth.

"You would think," Pilsud replied before reaching into his drawers and pulling out files that sent alarm bells into my head. Whatever they were, the papers were highly confidential. "But why panic when we could count on you to defend us?"

Is that how it's going to be?

It was understandable to help the Magyars against the Dacians and the Danes against the Legadonians, but helping the Pullskans against the Russites? As much as I despise the trap he has placed me in, I am compelled to accept his position.

Having a centrist military junta in Warschau is better than the Red Army, for the former can be restrained by international law and domestic support. At the same time, the latter held no scruples in subjugating a foreign people. If Japan had surrendered to Stalin instead of Truman, the Emperor would have shared a fate similar to the last royal family the Bolsheviks captured. I still grumbled somewhat as I picked up a random transcript and began reading. It wasn't until I realized this was a secret phone conversation between Pilsud and President Mazarik before the putsch. What does the Czech nationalist have to do with this…oh.

Oh.

I looked up to the elderly war veteran in awed disbelief.

"Is this a joke?" I couldn't believe what he was proposing.

"No, it is not." he shook his head. "I have conversed with all the other Imperial states on our collective future. Once Pullska's departure from the Francois alliance has been official, all other members will also leave."

All other members…The Czech-Slovak State, Osterry, Yugoslavia…nations necessary to contain Germanian revanchism in the Little Entente…abandoning the Francois Republic. I would laugh if my current location were different. This would be a diplomatic humiliation for the Francois on an unprecedented scale. Judging by the secret phone calls with Daneland and Lothiern, even the neutral post-imperial states would consider joining Pilsud's pet project of an alliance.

"You can thank me later, Argent Silver." The Pullskan grinned.

What the hell - how deep does this conspiracy go?

The Francois would have to retaliate against Pilsud to save face, though they would have to cut through Germania and Daneland first. I can only imagine how egregious the fallout would be in Parisee once this "alliance" is made official.

"Will it be another alliance of containment?" I asked, already dreading his answer.

"Yes, but against the real enemy: the Russy Federation and other things. Once the situation in Germania has been stabilized, an invitation will be delivered," he answered.

"It would violate the Treaty of Triano," I reminded him. Such an aggressive move would only provoke further reprisals from the Francois Republic, Illdoa, and Albion. There must be

something he is hiding from me. There is no other explanation for why he is offering such sensitive details.

"Triano is temporary. Brotherhood is eternal." He retorted, "Don't tell me you believe this European arrangement would be permanent."

"I will not disagree with the idea."

"Then you know war is on the horizon. That it is inevitable."

"But is it wise to defy it so early?" I asked.

"Wise? Just look at yourself in the mirror, my dear." Pilsud waved a hand towards my body. "The fact that you're a free woman standing in Warschau, free to fly and fight with a computation orb, despite razing Arene to the ground. Your being here and active demonstrates why I can defy Triano. I am old, Argent Silver, not blind."

The Francois will do nothing.

"I hope your assessment is correct and drawn from insightful investigations." I caught myself grinding my teeth; I didn't want to crack a molar. "Otherwise, we're both getting dragged to a tribunal in chains."

It wasn't exactly fair for Ignatsi Moscic to be made the face of the Pullskan Depression. There is a difference between failure by circumstance and failure by character, and I think - I certainly like to believe - that I am knowledgeable enough to discern that fine line from my past life as an HR manager.

Work is rarely predictable, even in a routine setting. Data can be unreliable; some are incomplete, some are artificially constructed, some are maligned with biases, and some are just flat-out incorrect due to the wrong methodology implemented. These errors will inevitably occur in government or a company, no matter how much a president or CEO will pour money into their departments.

Garbage in, Garbage out. As they say.

Unlike the former employee who pushed me onto the railway tracks, Moscic has a good head on his shoulders. Science and methodology will only improve over time; as such, circumstances change, and so should the standards of individual competency. I would disagree with the decision to fire Moscic if he worked with my company in Japan.

But I will not disagree that his performance was deeply unsatisfactory.

And yet, knowing the public's reaction was amicable to the putsch, perhaps it was best that he was removed. By trying to appease everyone, Moscic ended up pleasing no one. Not even his party. There were too simply many factors working against him at once.

Because his name was on a list of recommendations that Francois planned to lead the Pullskan Republic, the Imperial hardliners quickly assumed the worst out of his loyalties. A reputation that he could never escape when he accepted the proposal to join the Little Entente.

I can't blame him, however. Neutrality was a death sentence when the Russy Federation drew plans to push the Revolution westward, and the Francois Republic was the only continental power left with a substantial military. As weak as the Red Army was in the Great War, it should never be underestimated.

Of course, the Pullskan nationalists themselves felt betrayed. After spending a few days discussing matters of opposition with members of the Socialist Party, it was abundantly clear that the Francois had ulterior motives for the Little Entente: turning the post-imperial member states into its European colonies. Germanian-made goods were embargoed or placed under extremely high tariffs to force the Pullskans, Czechs, Slovaks, and everyone else to buy Francois goods. I suddenly remembered that comment by one of the Danish officers in Osby.

To say that the moderate socialists, liberals, and other open-minded Imperials were disappointed would be a massive understatement. Many had families and peers who owned and operated businesses in Germania - companies going under thanks to Francois meddling. They blamed their coalition leader for leading their country to economic recession to save themselves from the political fallout.

Moscic's explanation wasn't optimistic either. He felt trapped the entire time from 1933 till now, each day an eternal agony. Those trade wars and high tariffs were the only way for Pullska to acquire Francois armament surplus at a massive discount to allow for a rapid expansion and restructuring of the Pullskan military in preparation for a Bolshevik surprise attack - a quid pro quo with the Devil that is Parisian imperial interests. The Czechs alone could not meet the Pullskan needs at such short notice.

As for the extremists like Himmler's National Volkists, he just thought they would melt away like snow in spring once the economy was up and running like a well-oiled engine. Moscic didn't speak out against them since he feared it would grant those Fascists and Communists free publicity and awareness. In hindsight, it was an incredibly naive position to take. However reasonable it may be, given how the economy has not recovered quickly enough, those radicals are loud enough to be heard independently.

"Why will you not speak up for yourself?" I demanded, reaching up and pulling him down to my eye level by the collar after he gave me the letter of recommendation I requested. I did not endure Pilsud's self-congratulatory attitude in the Presidential Palace to find Moscic playing "tea-time" with his wife in the parlor with his kids. At the same time, there were armed policemen

around his property. "Do YOU think that if YOU allow everyone to drag your name through the mud and trod upon YOUR efforts to lead the nation out of calamity, they will simply FORGIVE and FORGET?"

"You didn't speak up for me…" he whimpered, all while his wife and children looked on with horror.

"That was MY mistake!" I was on the verge of strangling him with his tie. "But I will be damned if I allow you to stay silent on the matter. Stop pitying yourself!"

"Then…what do you suppose I should do?"

"Tell the truth. Let the record show that you served with honesty and integrity." I lectured him in a softer tone. "Pilsud promised a return to elections, but someone needs to hold him accountable for his words. Let that be you."

"Will they listen?"

"You have a tongue, a mouth full of teeth, and a functioning brain." I released him from my grip and let him stumble back to his wife's open arms. "Use them."

I have no clue what was going on in Parisee for the Francois to consider him the best candidate for leadership, but I am starting to get the picture. It almost irritated me, but I cannot fault them for trying to get a "friendly face" in Warschau.

"Keep an eye on him." I told her, "Make sure he doesn't do anything counterproductive."

What does a person have to do to find reports from Germania? All the newspapers from the republic and from Pullska itself were sold out on that particular day for the sixth time in a row. While one can go to a beer hall or coffee shop to eavesdrop on conversations and gossip, I had no appetite to indulge in more anti-Judean conspiracy. Despite my best efforts in using Daneland to spearhead the crusade against misinformation, people around me continue to cling to these lies like drug addicts and alcoholics.

The phone booth was equally useless. Visha and Elena weren't at the office when I requested their presence. I only got vague assurances that they would be present and enthusiastic at the time of my return before hanging up immediately. I half-suspected the man at the other end of the telephone was one of Elena's underlings.

I would have to remind her to enforce proper work etiquette among her employees.

It had to be one of Elena's men, rare that it is since she mostly hires young, unemployed women.

Visha surrounded herself with White Russy Cossacks in her growing clique in the Reichsbanner Drachen; I would have smelled the vodka from their breaths through the phone line. If not for their stench of gunpowder, smoke, and alcohol, it would be their Slavic accents slurring their words.

The man on the phone wouldn't be one of Konig's, Weiss's, or Neuman's lackeys. They're jingoistic meatheads; hardly any of them would willingly take a desk job over outdoor "activities." I would have to break both legs to get the men to sit in a chair and force them to engage in bureaucratic paperwork and arrange appointments.

My train of thought was interrupted when I finally spotted a newspaper kiosk with only half of the shelves empty. The only ones left were magazines and newspapers from Francia, Albion, and American publication companies. Unsurprisingly the papers remained unsold since all three were opponents of the Empire, the Pullskans were not so quick to forget that.

The man running the small enterprise looked old enough to have witnessed the unification of the Empire six decades ago. Hell, even the wrinkles on his face seem to suggest he even fought in the Preusso-Francian War. He simply regarded me quizzically as if he had seen me before. I already knew the question he would ask, but I was not in the mood to break incognito.

"Before you ask," I held my hand to pause his mouth, "I just look like her. I get that a lot."

With a nod, the elder held his tongue, allowing me to browse through the international news reports, but upon close inspection, I realized many of them were weeks outdated though I also wondered if they were simply regurgitating previous best-selling news stories.

The Germanian Democratic Party Sold Its Soul to the Devil! Screamed one Francois headline.

Germania Faces Rapid Inflation! Debtors and Creditors in Doubt! Yelled the Albish one.

Europe in Moral Crisis! An Ambassador Regrets Military Intervention! Shouted the American title.

Yellow Journalism at its finest.

Almost sarcastically, I picked up the American newspaper, published by the New Amstreldam Times and most up-to-date, and picked my way to the Europe section. Judging by the interviews, polls, and editorials, isolationism in the Unified States was on the rise as the average American seemed to believe that the whole endeavor to enter the Great War was a waste of time, effort, and valuable manpower.

The last part was genuine. My career in the Empire saw an unprecedented depletion of American mages in a few months.

The feeling was only compounded worse by the loans that the Allied Powers accumulated with the American banks during the eight years of attrition. Though Francia and Albion claimed to be the world's strongest power due to their military, I grinned devilishly knowing that they would quickly get a reality check that their power had an expiration date. America loves their money more than anything in the world.

If the Unified States doesn't get their loans back on time, they'll simply take Albion's and Francia's colonial possessions as collateral. Wouldn't that be a grand sight? Judging the revanchist attitude in Central Europe, Imperial citizens everywhere would gladly crawl into a grave and die in that hole if it meant that the enemies of the Empire got reduced to utter subservience to the Americans.

Yet, my pleasure from that imagined scenario was immediately dispersed when I came across a published report by the American ambassador to the Principality of Dacia.

Steel Legion Dacia now. The defeat in the Magyar-Dacian War saw the complete collapse of the Dacian monarchy in 1931. In an attempt to preserve whatever stability was left, the king had invited the Steel Legion, a far-right ultranationalist movement, to set up a fascist regime to save the nation from Bolshevik revolutionaries and rising instability. Extreme populism, Christian mysticism, an unhealthy dose of revanchism, and religious nationalism are the ingredients in which tyrannies are born. My stomach plummeted to the bowels of the earth when the ambassador described how the Steel Legion had operated since the early months of 1932.

True to fascist doctrine, the Legionnaires openly blamed the two humiliating defeats against the Empire and Magyarozag on the ethnic minorities that lived in the country, mainly Judeans and Gipsies, and called for their violent removal from society and state. A regime built to enact a "national purification."

Gipsies?

I looked back to my past life to remember if I had encountered the word. It sounded familiar, but I was unsure how or where I encountered it. Even during my tenure in the Imperial Academy, I don't remember hearing that name. I tried looking back further to my childhood in the orphanage but the blankness irked me somewhat.

Regardless, the Legionnaires spent the current year finding their scapegoats to purge in broad daylight. I fought hard to swallow the bile building up in my throat when the American ambassador, Forian Mottner, wrote in his report to Philadelphia that Judeans were subjected to great brutality; among the victims included children no older than five. At the same time, the Gipsies themselves were forcibly removed from urban centers and rural villages at gunpoint, mandated to dig their graves, and then shot by Legionnaires once the deep pits were done.

Numbers were not given since the killings became routine. Still, Mottner ended his testament with a statement claiming that Legionnaires in Iasi recently uprooted an underground nightclub for homosexual men before subjecting them to similar levels of cruelty.

Being X, can you not see what your followers are doing?!

An eyewitness report of the inhumanity occurring in Dacia was buried in a text of irrelevancy: opinion pieces, book reviews, stock market statistics, and ads for cigars, fashion, and upcoming movies. Why does no one seem to think this was important?

This should have been on the first page of every newspaper around the world! Why aren't the Americans doing anything? Don't they enjoy interfering in the politics of other nations? This was the perfect excuse to bring "democracy" over to Bucharest!

In my compounded frustration, I let the newspaper slip from my hands, causing the elder man to turn his attention toward me.

"What's the matter?" he asked dryly.

I ignored him as I ripped out the Francois newspaper from the display and immediately sought out any news concerning Dacia. My terror was impalpable when Parisee praised the "modernization" efforts of the Steel Legion. The expansion of railroads, public infrastructure, urban sanitization, and military procurement were the priorities for Francois journalists to report on. I understand that being allies with foreign powers meant overlooking some unpleasant aspects, but this was too much.

I quickly threw it aside ("You'll have to pay for that, little girl.") and immediately reached for the Albish newspapers. The one I picked was The Radio Times from the Albish Broadcasting Corporation; for all things precious and pure, please bring awareness to the atrocities…

Magyar Authorities Deported Gispsies Back to the Dacian Border. Regent Horvath Cites Concerns of National Security.

Deported?

"Young lady, you look sick…" The old attendant pointed out to my face, "What is the matter?"

"What is the matter?" I repeated harshly, turning to stare straight into his eyes. There was concern in his eyes, but it was reserved only for me. "What is going on in Dacia?"

"Dacian business, per usual," he replied, shrugging his shoulders.

"They're killing children," I said, emphasizing every syllable. "People - the Judeans and the…Gipsies are getting murdered…and destroying homosexual clubs."

"So I've heard - hmph, they're always killing children. They're Dacians." He spoke to me as if I was a dull-witted student. "It's what they do. It's how they think and speak and act. It's why their nation was so woefully antiquated and incompetent."

"Always?" My eye twitched. Was this man on a different planet?

"Well, not always." The old vendor grunted, looking back to his childhood memories as if he sought a relic from a bygone age. "I still vaguely remember when I was a young lad that Dacia used to enslave Gipsies - before the Empire was united. It was the last nation in Europe to abolish slavery - I think I still have the pamphlet somewhere in my attic…I still remember when I saw my first Gipsi…"

"Do tell." I implored him, "What was the man like?"

"He was a thief," he replied bluntly. "Stole apples, bread, and purses at my village's market square. Wore dreadfully poor cloth and stank to high heaven; I could swear I could see the fleas and lice living in his hair."

"How…horrible." I grimaced. "Surely, the institutions of the Empire would allow for the people to embrace their freedom and rebuild their lives."

"Ha! The naivety of young maidens. Just like the Argent Silver getting in bed with the Progressives!" The vendor bellowed a big-bellied laugh. "I will never hear the end of it! But truthfully, I wish I had your optimism. In my 60 years of being a citizen of the Empire, I can assure you the government has not once failed me."

Then he suddenly turned serious. The brief flash of good humor and nostalgia was replaced with ironclad apathy and scorn.

"The foolish liberals and socialists thought they could civilize the Gipsies; they were wrong and will continue to be wrong. Everything you hear about these foreigners is no exaggeration. My son, grandson, and great-grandson would prove that statement true."

"How can you say that?!" I found my voice growing louder; I hoped that Being X heard me. "These are people…people with lives, with names, with ambition! No different than the Judeans or the homosexuals getting massacred alongside them."

"I know many Judeans who will bring harm to you and your body by saying that Judeans and Gipsies are the same." He replied coldly, betraying no notion of embellishment or deception. "Judeans are honest, diligent, and knowledgeable; model citizens of the Empire whose traits that none of the Gipsies demonstrate. Yes, it is a shame that the Dacians are killing Judeans but Judeans are hardly folk. They will endure - they always do. If the Tzars couldn't destroy them, nothing can."

"And the Gipsies?"

Tired of my persistence, the newspaper vendor simply leaned against the counter and spoke in a hushed tone.

"Fascists who say Judeans are dishonest, cowardly, and draft dodgers have never encountered Gipsi. My grandson who served in the Eastern Front told me stories of how conscripted Gipsies in his battalion deserted at a moment's notice, stealing their uniforms and guns with them and becoming bandits."

"And you believed him…" I said.

"Why shouldn't I? I know how Gipsies live as civilians. Ask anyone in Pullska, Slovakia, Germania, Magyarozag, and Yugoslavia and they will tell you the same story."

Does he not hear his own words?

With a heavy sigh, I put back the newspapers and paid for the Albish and American ones. It was a waste of time to continue bickering with an old geezer; I suddenly found a new hope that Pilsud's Sanation regime would address this discriminatory attitude towards the Gipsies. Surely even he draws the line of where he stood against the Steel Legion.

If there's one good thing about being the Argent Silver, I rarely get refused entry. Walking into the Magyar embassy in Warschau, the employees might as well laid out a red carpet and throw roses at my feet upon my arrival. But I was not here to gloat nor sign autographs. Addressing the first front desk attendant I saw, I requested - No, Demanded - to see the Magyar ambassador.

"He is currently occupied in a lunch meeting right now." the gentleman replied, "If you want, I can certainly arrange for an appointment next week."

"The matters that I wish to discuss with him cannot be delayed," I stated, wiping the slight smile off the young man's face. "It is a matter of basic human decency: a genocide is taking place on Magyarozag's front porch."

"Gen-o-cide?" The attendant repeated the word as if he had just eaten a cherry caramel chocolate from Waldsatte. "I'll mention it to him."

I didn't have to wait long after the young worker left his desk to retrieve the man I requested. The ambassador had burst through the door as if bayonets chased him. His mouth was stuffed with food; I could smell the garlic shrimp and Burgundy wine on him, as he tried desperately to chew fast. He immediately excused himself to the nearest washroom to rinse his face. When he

came back, he looked as if he just run a mile through the Great Sahara. His name tag addressed him as Miksa Roberts.

"Argent Silver!" the ambassador panted as he bowed to kiss my hand. "It is a great, GREAT, honor to meet you in person finally! I thought you would already be on your way to Germania."

Robert's enthusiasm was cut short when I withdrew my palm before he had the chance to lay a finger on my skin.

"It has come to my attention that the Americans have brought ill news from Dacia that demanded equal Magyar attention." I waved the newspapers across his face.

The ambassador's face grew grim at my words.

"Bucharest is planning another war?"

"Worse. They are massacring ethnic minorities." I answered.

Robert must be a psychopath since he only let out a soft, weak chuckle in bewilderment.

"Is that what this is all about? Why does it concern Magyarozag what Dacia does to its people?"

"It concerns Magyarozag when the Regent Horvath refused the Gipsies asylum status in the kingdom!" I pointed to the section detailed in the Albish newspaper. "Their culture is getting wiped out and your country has sent them back to certain death."

"How is it Magyarozag's fault that Dacia is engaged in such brutality?" He questioned, feeling more confused at the moment. "We've beaten them during the Great War as the Empire and beaten them again as a nation. From what I can understand, Dacia is setting fire to its garden. Why should Budapestera be concerned with neighbors destroying their backyards?"

"Because the crimes committed transcend all national boundaries," I stated. This is getting ridiculous. "Refusing refuge is one of them."

"What crimes? And why are you so furious about our current policy regarding border security? We all know that Dacia's ambitions did not end with the Treaty of Triano."

What crimes? What Crimes?

"Crimes against humanity." I spelled it out slowly with snarling teeth. "Dacians are killing Judeans, killing Gipsies, killing anyone that did not conform to the new government."

"I suppose that is a warrant for concern." Roberts shrugged slightly, "But do not worry, the Magyar Army will ensure that the actions of the Steel Legion are confined in Dacia."

"We both know that is not the assurance I am looking for."

"Then what are you looking for exactly? Armed intervention?" the ambassador said sarcastically, though he quickly adjusted his attitude when my mouth wasn't exactly drowning in laughter. "I am sorry to say, but Magyarozag has no appetite for another war against Dacia so soon. Truly."

"Then perhaps at least a public condemnation?" I inquired, "The Steel Legion Party is killing children."

Even at the compromise, the ambassador still looked hesitant.

"I can certainly bring up this situation to Budapestera and your statement would give it the attention it deserves."

"That I can arrange." I grabbed a pen and a blank piece of paper to list bullet points that needed to be addressed in a public statement. Roberts looked over my shoulder and grew even more anxious.

"We will certainly have no problem condemning the Dacians over the Judeans but…"

"But what?" I demanded him.

"We will just condemn their treatment of the Judeans."

"Why?!"

"Because you told us to…"

"That is not the correct answer."

"For God's sake, Argent Silver, what the hell do you want us to do? Budapestera has no appetite for another war so soon - the people are still feeling the hunger of the Turnip Winters - and knowing about the Steel Legion, we would have to drag their corpses from office to get them to stop doing whatever they are doing. An action that requires a large army and a mandate from the people to intervene. Neither of which Horvath has."

"Do whatever you can to condemn Dacia for the genocide occurring; not ignoring one ethnic group in favor of another," I replied, trying to keep my mind calm despite my compounding frustration. "As well as apologize for the unlawful handling of Gipsi refugees and a reversal of the current inhumane border policy."

Roberts only grimaced.

"Unlawful? Inhumane? Genocide? Pardon me, Argent Silver, but where are you reaching that conclusion? As far as I am aware, there are no laws, international or domestic, that Magyarozag has broken."

Shit. He is right.

My face immediately went to my hands to bury in. He is right. All those international laws and institutions came after WWII, after the war crimes in Asia and in Europe by the Militarists and the Nazis. As seemingly toothless as the institutions may be in my old life for some critics, at least they existed to be read and understood. The nations of Europe have no idea what will come if the continent continues scapegoating and wallowing in apathy.

America is content looking after itself and has no desire to look across the pond. Albion is only concerned about the Great Powers of Europe, not caring what a backward, weak, and humiliated statelet in the Balkans is thinking. Francia is merely enabling Dacia's worst antics, seemingly out of pure spite against me or Magyarozag. The Russy Federation would only use the genocide in Dacia to cover up their atrocities rather than push for a genuine humanity among nations. Illdoa is just Illdoa: caring only about enriching itself; being the shameless gold-digger of Europe.

They will not understand the consequences of their inhumanity until they are victims of someone else's inhumanity. And they will not be made victims until it is far too late.

That only leaves Germania and the Social Democrat Party as the "World's Policeman." Given the apparent dangers of tolerating the Steel Legion to their constituents, President Erbel and Chancellor Herimann cannot ignore the situation in Bucharest. Putting a stop to Dacia's antics would solidify the Progressive Bloc as a functioning, united, and competent; the coalition to bring normalcy back to society.

Despite being another burden heaped upon their plate of woes, I must rally them to put an end to this atrocious regime. For the good of everyone involved.

"Don't worry, Argent Silver," Robert said, looking rather sympathetic. "If it helps your schedule, I can write the letter myself and personally deliver it to Horvath and Gumbos. You are a busy young lady, after all. We will condemn Dacia's treatment of the Judeans."

But not the treatment of the Gipsies went unsaid.

"Condemn all of it." I looked up and stared into his eyes. "It's not just the destruction of an entire people - look at what happened in Iasi. Consider what them means for everyone else in Europe. Especially to Germanians."

"My lady, I swear to you, on my honor, that we will do all that we can but I must return to my appointment," he swore before returning to his office. If I had lacked self-control, I would have smashed a crater onto the heavy oak coffee table.

"Uhhh, Argent Silver?" came a small voice from the corner of my eye, "You might want to see this..."

I turned around and saw a small delivery boy, trembling in excitement or fear, sheepishly handing over a newspaper. It was from Neu Deutschland, the newspaper arm of the Germanian Democratic Party.

Hopefully, it is good news for a change.

"My older sister told me to find you and give the paper to you. She says her big boss wanted you to read it. You were very hard to find…" he half-explained, half-whispered, before immediately hopping onto his bicycle before I had a chance to question him. "You should have been in Germania right now!"

"How strange…" I muttered, before looking at the front page. I was immediately taken back by a picture of broken windows of a nondescript store vandalized by a crude, painted Judean Star over a window, with rubble and burned items scattered on the sidewalk and streets. Beside the entrance, what remained of it, were uniformed men.

My heart plummeted once again when I recognized the attire.

These are Julius Rohr's men in Berun.

The Reichsbanner, especially my Freikorps, was to ensure the SA never entered the capital! Now, that fat, drunk demagogue has carved a path to coup the republican government itself. Why did no one reach out to me? Is that why all the newspapers were sold out?

Nationwide Boycott Devolves into National Anarchy. Rhineland, Westphalia, and Bavaria In Open Revolt.

Visha, what did you do?!

Author's Note: Thank you all for your patience. The story will continue.

Chapter Fifteen - The Streets Are Made of Glass

On my trip back to Berun, idle chatter in the passenger car taught me two things that had developed in Germania: first, The attempt on my life had spread like wildfire after the Neu Deutschland had first published the news.

Other media outlets simply followed suit on the latest piece of sensational news telling. Foerster somehow talked despite stressing the importance of secrecy considering how volatile the atmosphere is; Second, the original Stab-in-the-Back myth I debunked countless times was outdated, obsolete, and hijacked by a new betrayal centered entirely around me.

No longer was it that Germania had been stabbed in the back by the treacherous Liberals and Socialists. No, I was betrayed by those Liberals and Socialists. According to the story, clearly a fabrication, I was investigating a conspiracy concerning the Weimar Regime after being tipped off by a whistleblower from within. The Progressive Bloc had hired Zhabotinski and his men to see me permanently removed from the equation for "getting too close to the truth."

My first reaction? March straight into the DNVP headquarters and drag Foerster by his ears before ripping them off for spreading such false and malicious rumors about the Progressives, especially when the country needs stability to recover. Yet, this felt like something other than the work of Foerster; he belonged to the DNVP after all. He can't be an editor of a newspaper that belonged to his party's ideological rival.

Was it one of Zhabotinski's men with the loose tongue? I severely doubt it, considering the immediate ramifications it would bring among the extremists roaming the streets. Perhaps it was another eyewitness in Konigsberg that spilled the beans. Regardless, if not Foerster, I would be on a wild goose chase trying to figure out how the incident was leaked to one of the most prolific newspapers in the republic.

To explain the truth to the passengers was exhausting. They were almost disappointed as to how the assassination attempt went down. It was as if the people wanted an ancient conspiracy about a hidden cabal concerned with world domination which I cannot fathom to comprehend the appeal. Can we just not agree that failure can come from more mundane sources within our government?

As to how the National Vanguardists marched north and made a mess of everything: I also got two conflicting answers. One camp stated that Rohr approached the right-wing conservatives and fascists like the DNVP for a temporary alliance to launch a nationwide boycott of Judean goods and businesses in protest against recent actions in Konigsberg. The other camp argued that it was the Heinrich Class and Herr Goering that approached Rohr for a mutual agreement to launch the boycott.

In the end, it did not matter who initiated this political alliance since the results would still be the same: a complete breakdown of relations. As soon as the boycott was 'unleashed' and

'completed' the night of November 4th, Rohr's Sturmabteilung engaged in street combat against Goering, Class, and a dozen other conservative Freikorps with tens of thousands of Judeans and Germanians caught in the crossfire. Even the police were divided between pro and anti-Rohr lines.

As for the Reichsbanner, they were in the Rhineland.

Why were they in the Rhineland?

That was the only thing everyone shared the same answer: to fight the Spartacus front to "secure the November election" from the Reds, taking almost all the Judean militias with them as well. The motive I understand perfectly fine but the method…the strategy…the doctrine…

What was Visha thinking? Leaving the backyard exposed to Rohr's stormtroopers…Cossacks alone cannot hold against the sheer number of Brownshirts marching north.

At least Beruners sided with the Progressive Coalition and helped chase Rohrites out of the city at the break of dawn. But the damage was already done.

At that point, I was too worn out to continue questioning people gathering around me. A National Revolution was called by Rohr's newest propagandist, Paul Fritz Odenhausen, demanding an overthrow of the SPD, radical land and wealth redistribution, and, most damning of all, restoring the "honor and integrity" of, yours truly, the Ace of Aces.

For the good of Europe, I will have my Reichsbanner throw these National Vanguardists into the abyss. I already let one man hijack my name to overthrow a republic, I cannot let that happen again.

Dacia has been turned into a human slaughterhouse but for the average mother trying to escort her son to school in this mess in Berun, that was not anywhere near her biggest concern.

Looking at the small hills of burning books, the streets and sidewalks covered with glass shards, political ads flying through the bleeze or plastered all over brick walls and lamp pots, and hearing the occasional gunshot in the distance, I almost found it hard to believe that the boycott lasted only one night; if it weren't for the fact that the buildings in Berun were still intact and its inhabitants still alive, I would have mistaken the carnage as another battlefield in the Great War.

It was a rather low bar to suggest that the city was 'fine'. The Federal policemen moved in groups of 20 since it was still unsafe to perform patrols with a lower body count.

Whether out of apathy or the desire to avoid accountability, people just passed these vandalized shops, sometimes stopping to look at the damages in open awe. They avoid stepping on the broken glass like a chef avoiding eggshells on the floor. While some expressed disappointment,

many simply spent their money elsewhere at ethnic Germanian establishments spared from the boycott.

Yet, for every four people who looked at the devastation with blinders on, there was one activist who threw stones into the windows owned by Judean or left-leaning shopkeepers. "Traitorous Scum!" and "Vote for Degurechaff!" were their slogans, interchangeable really, as the phrases both implied violent retribution if the elections did not turn out in my party's favor.

An armored car zoomed past me, bearing the iconography of the Totenkopf, and behind it was a truck carrying a small company of Freikorps still dressed in their Great War uniforms. Their helmets were painted with the same symbol. One of the men on top of the vehicle locked eyes with me and it spurned him into action.

"HEIL DEGURECHAFF!" he roared, raising his right arm at a stiff 45-degree angle and prompting his comrades to bolt out of their doldrums to look in my direction. "DEATH TO ROHR! DEATH TO LUTZEBUERG!"

"Death to Rohr! Death to Lutzebuerg!" His comrades shouted, trying to see my face but the truck had already turned around the corner.

"For the Empire…!" their voices melted away into the din that is the new urban life of Berun.

Despite their brief screaming, a small crowd of men and women, young and old, had saluted the paramilitary men in quiet observance. Curious enough, among them were workers putting up political campaign ads for the DDP. Why is that? The Totenkopf belonged to men aligned with the ultraconservative establishment. The Junker elites were just as much of a rival to the liberal order as were the Communists, the National Vanguardists, and the Fascists.

Vote For Liberty! Vote For Freedom! One poster read as it depicted Lady Germania dressed as a knight in full-plate armor, protected by a shield depicting the twin-headed dragon while her sword had the tricolors of the Germanian Republic wrapped around it.

At least I think it was Lady Germania. Growing up, she was always depicted with brown hair with grey eyes but here, Lady Germania has blond hair with blue eyes. While imitation is the sincerest form of flattery and I would certainly earn a lot of political capital, the current state of affairs has left me with a tiny seed of doubt.

I found myself gravitating towards my headquarters with the growing need to reach Visha though a part of me urged to contact Heimal Schlage immediately. The boycott, the rioting, and the street violence between the paramilitaries would have put a sharp halt to Schlage's plans of economic recovery. Plus, I needed to explain what occurred in Pullska as rumors would have already reached his ears. Reaching into my purse, relief reentered my throat when I felt Moscic's letter.

"Excuse me," I gave my best, most innocent-sounding voice to one of the overseers directing where the campaign ads should go. He was a young man, perhaps the same age as Weiss, with sharp features and a strong muscular body. The only thing hideous around him was a fencing scar on the left side of his face that started from his mouth and reached his ear. "Are you part of the Germanian Democratic Party? Or merely employed."

"The former, my lady," he responded with a quick bow. "I am sorry but I am on a tight schedule. I don't think I can answer all your questions if you have any."

"I only have one." I replied, "I just want to know if Heimal Schlage is in the city, in his office at the DDP headquarters."

The young man left out a huff as if he were given a physics equation to decipher.

"I cannot say for sure he would be there, given how violent the streets have become recently… it would be important for him to seek protection…"

"This is concerning the Ace of Aces…" I interrupted him with a wink, already impatient with his babble.

Immediately, the overseer paused and studied my face before looking back at the poster on the wall to glance at the portrait of Lady Germania. He did this several times before shrugging his shoulders and muttering something indiscreet under his breath. Only then did he lean forward for a slight whisper.

"Herr Schlage lives in the Reich Presidential Palace like a little dog to Erbel now. But my fiance says that he will be returning to his office to pick up any files that survived the fire."

"Fire?!" My alarm bells went off in my head in an instant.

"Yeah, one of Rohr's men threw some torches inside the building after the boycott. That was when the war started."

At that point, I threw aside any previous concerns I had with Visha and ran toward the DDP headquarters. Although my clique had pooled money together to buy a humble storefront to convert into our library of data collecting, it was paramount to assist Schlage in finding and preserving the materials we had accumulated over the last campaigning season. Whatever is left of it, at least. Material that is crucial in allowing us to combat the rising inflation and Triano payments due to the Francois. I hoped beyond hope that Schlage has shared copies with Zentrum and the SPD.

Deeper into Berun, the scenery did not get any better: I encountered barricades made of wrecked cars, sandbanks, and loose bricks; machine gun nests barred entire streets. It was as if

the capital was under foreign occupation with the gross number of Freikorps soldiers, including Cossacks, guarding every street corner and maintaining vigilance.

Yet, the terror of a civil war was inescapable. Out of the corner of my eye, a group of civilians, a few rabbis among them, were held with their faces against a wall with bayonets pointed at their spines. Yet, the conflict was between the two soldiers, one a great bearded Cossack and the other an old SPD officer. Both men looked ready to shoot each other to settle their dispute with their underlings following suit. Naturally, I rather not let this spat turn ugly if I can help it.

"Damn it all! If only the Argent Silver was here…" the Russite swore under his breath as I approached behind him.

"Wish granted," I announced, causing the warrior to turn around and nearly jump a meter into the air. "What is going on here?"

"Thank God…it really is you." the Reichsbanner officer breathed a sigh of relief, "Please, tell this drunken, oafish Slav that these people are our voters, not theirs."

"Voters?" I inquired.

"Aye, voters." the Russite grunted, "My men and I were to escort them to the voting station to vote for the DDP. It is the only way to get you into the Reichstag."

Escort. Right.... That is why the bayonets were required.

"But they are registered Social Democrats!" the old man yelled, "They are to vote for us! You have already siphoned enough of our popular base - no offense to you, Argent Silver - our party needs to maintain its seats in the Reichstag."

"Your party is filled with Marxists. You shouldn't be in the Reichstag in the first place! These voters are going for the Germanian Democrats."

"Are you part of the DDP?" I looked at the Cossack to scrutinize him, if only his clothes were as well groomed as his beard.

"HA - no! Why would I ever associate myself with a party of Judean-lovers?" He replied rhetorically. "If it weren't for you, I would never be in this situation to begin with. Isn't that right, lads? You are the only woman in this entire damnable part of Europe who has the strength and courage to overcome the Bolshevik menace."

"And yet here you are." I gritted my teeth.

"Aye, I don't trust Schlage or any Judean in the DDP but with you at the helm, I certainly trust them more than I trust these Marxist dogs." He threw a hand at the elder Social Democrat.

"We have been through this before: don't twist my allegiance with the freaks in the Rhineland. Lutzebuerg is a whore to Moskva - not President Erbel or Chancellor Herimann." the old man glared daggers back at the Cossack. "And you know that."

"Just let them go," I stated, wanting to end this worthless scenery. It is seriously damaging my reputation when the election is so close. "Let them vote for whoever they want."

"What?!" the Russite looked at me as if I had a second head on my shoulders.

"Did I stutter?" I spoke, staring him down, "LET. THEM. GO."

With a scowl, he gestured his men to relinquish the bayonets from the civilians' backs. A small plethora of "thank yous" were headed my way as the small crowd vacated the street as fast as their legs could carry them.

The men of Reichsbanner Red looked very content as they too marched in the opposite direction. The company leader gave me a nod of approval before his departure.

"Good luck educating these barbaric Slavs…" He called out.

Ignoring the last comment, I maintained my attention on the Cossacks.

"There seems to be a misconception about my endorsement." I explained as simply as I could while trying to restrain myself from ripping off his beard, "Just because I joined one party does not automatically mean all other parties are suspect. The Social Democrats and Zentrum are not the same as the Communists or the National Vanguardists. And I further encourage you and everyone else here to drop this prejudiced attitude immediately."

"You are playing a dangerous game, Argent Silver." The Cossack replied. "We all know what happened to the last Tzar when he associated himself with liberals and Judeans."

"The last Tzar was a self-righteous idiot and a pathetic failure of a statesman. You are worshipping a man who couldn't govern a village and have the audacity to act surprised and enraged as to why your beloved empire fell to the Bolsheviks. Those liberals were trying to save it from the Reds…"

"They will betray you…" He warned as the brashness in his voice was replaced with mild timidity. "They will betray you and kill you. Just like what they tried to do in Konigsberg."

"People have been trying to kill me ever since I swore allegiance to the Empire. What happened in Konigsberg is no different and none of your concern. Do you still want to be useful to me? Go west and kill some Communists or march south to kill some National Vanguardists."

"But-"

"You have done enough damage in Berun already or have you and your men gone soft tormenting helpless civilians?" I shut down his pitiful protest. "Now go and make yourself productive and stop chasing after shadows and ghosts before I make you all into one."

With no one else brave, or dumb, enough to make another dissenting opinion, the Cossacks left the area grumbling curses under their breath. I will have to bring this issue up with Schlage concerning the Cossacks. Discipline and judicial action would be required to investigate their instances of voter intimidation as well as…whatever else happened in Berun during the boycott.

"Argent Silver, I am truly sorry but I am not allowed to talk to you…" the front desk secretary whispered to me upon my arrival.

"What? Why?"

I did not walk through militarized checkpoints, have the soles of my shoes penetrated by glass shards, and see my identity robbed and plastered on every campaign poster imaginable. Just a street down from here, I saw a young boy wearing the brown uniform of the SA getting lynched by a mob of Cossacks who were thrice his age.

I can still see his corpse swaying in the wind underneath a street lamp.

"You are not allowed here anymore…Herr Schlage -"

"Is my ally and respects me. What are you talking about? Is this building not the primary think tank of the Germanian Democratic Party? The burned marks on the ceiling and walls suggest it so." I cut her off.

"Please, I am on your side - we're all on your side - but…"

"But what? What is it? Why am I not allowed to enter a building that belongs to a party that I am a part of?"

"You were expelled." Another woman came forward, carrying a box of burned papers and soot, as she gave me a sympathetic look. "The announcement came last night. Herr Schlage revoked your membership."

"Don't be ridiculous…this is not a time for pranks-" I spoke aloud before another female staff member gave me a small notice. "No…This can't be…that cannot be true."

Adjusting Our Membership

In light of recent events concerning our most loyal and diligent member of the DDP, it is undoubtedly clear that her interests in Germania do not align with ours. Her actions include but are not limited to collusion with foreign powers, promoting civil strife, corrupting the democratic culture, and conspiracy to overthrow the republic. I, Heimal Schalge, have decided to revoke her privilege of party membership. Any and all current and future collaboration, association, and fraternization with her and her peers must cease effective immediately or face equal termination. A full announcement will be made within the next 72 hours.

In that moment, nothing else mattered. Not the looks of pity and concern of the workers, not the broken glass windows, nor the black marks that scarred the building. My entire world was found on that piece of paper and I laughed when I should have screamed. I LAUGHED.

"You're not supposed to be here." a male voice emerged from behind me after the doors were slammed shut.

I turned around to see my former superior and he looked as if he saw action in the Rhineland front. His face was contorted with renewed bewilderment and utter contempt while his eyes looked tormented and foreboding. We stared at each other for a second before he broke contact and walked toward his office.

"Herr Schlage." I spoke first, trying to grab his arm, "I can explain!"

"Don't bother. Get out," he demanded, not even bothering to look in my direction when he swatted my hand away. "I don't want anything to do with you."

"Please, just let me clarify."

"I don't want to hear it. Get out!"

"Wait! You just don't understand."

"I understand well enough. GET OUT!" Schlage shouted before attempting to slam his office door onto my face but I was quick enough to catch the door handle and close it behind me.

"I AM NOT LEAVING UNTIL WE TALK FIRST," I stated, staring him down with an honest smile. "Please…I just want to talk about what happened."

With a long and drawn-out sigh, Schlage retreated from my gaze and leaned against his ruined table. His face found more interest in the blackened wood while I stared at his back.

"Herr Schlage -"

"I am the one asking the questions here, Degurechaff. You either answer them or leave."

He looked up from the desk and stared blankly at the wall ahead.

"Do you remember when we first met and discussed background checks on your associates?"

"Yes," I answered truthfully, walking around the table to look at Schlage's face. There is no reason to lie, after all. "I remember."

"Do you remember that we agreed that you would oversee the background checks of your associates and future clique members?"

"Yes."

"What became of it?"

"I appointed my most trusted partner, Viktoriya Serebryakov, to oversee the background checks while I had to move on to other duties."

"Serebryakov…the Slav?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who she is?"

"Of course I do! She has been my subordinate during the Great War. What are you -"

"Silence, girl." There was more defeat in his voice than fury when he said that. What happened to him? I had never encountered him like this before. "Do you know who Serebryakov is?"

"I just told you, yes."

"DO YOU KNOW WHO SEREBRYAKOV IS?"

"Yes. I. Do."

"No. You do not." Schlage shook his head in disappointment, "To think I once saw you as wise beyond your years. You are just an ignorant little girl who brings death and strife wherever she goes."

"Then please, enlighten me…" I spoke through snarled teeth.

"She is a Kievan Cossack. Her family are Kievan Cossacks."

"So-"

"They were Judenjagers."

Judean Hunters?

"Her father, grandfather, her great-grandfather, and her great-great-grandfather were Judenjagers…ordered by the Tzars to find and exterminate Judeans within the Russy Empire. The Serebryakovs, like every other White Russy Cossack Exile here in this God-forsaken country, have killed thousands, tens of thousands perhaps, of Judeans before fleeing into the Empire when the Bolsheviks triumphed.

If you were diligent in examining the history of your followers, you would know. But because you didn't, I had to do it for you on short notice. There were an increasing number of party members in the DDP that had no business being in it…"

"What does this have to do with Viktoriya? Putting the sins of her forefathers upon her shoulder?"

"Degurechaff…did you ever ask her what she was doing before she was a conscript? Ever asked her what she thought of democracy and individualism? Ever asked her what she was doing after being DEMOBILIZED?!"

"No." A small but growing sense of shame burned my ears. My work must have deprieved me from noticing her personal habits. "She was silent on the matter and I felt such discussions were irrelevant when concerning the party's future."

"No indeed." Schlage let out another heavy sigh, rubbing his forehead in the process. "Tell you want to know what your Slavic friend was doing. Tell me that you want to hear it. Just tell me."

"I need to know," I replied, feeling like my mind was on a ship in the middle of a typhoon. I took a deep breath to steel myself for the flood."I want to hear it."

"Ok…that Slavic whore of yours…she was once part of a student organization in her university comprised of other like-minded students, White Russites including, campaigning to expel a professor for promoting 'Judeo-Bolshevism' in the curriculum as well as putting anti-semitic conspiracy books in the library. It would have succeeded if it weren't for their number being called up to the nearest conscription station. That was the best day of that professor's life - hoping that all those young men and women died in the trenches in the Rhineland.

Until he got shot by those who survived during the Boycott.

Regardless, after the war, while you chose to fight in Magyarozag, Serebryakov joined RNOD, the Russy National Liberation Movement, a far-right, anti-communist, anti-semitic, pro-Tzarist organization led by Alexander Il'in. A party of White Russites that campaigned for

you-know-what for you-know-who. After you went to Daneland, she followed you there and we both know what happened later.

And I had uncovered all of this while you were busy killing democracy in Pullska and jumping in bed with the Preussians."

My mind was blank as white paper. I just couldn't believe what I was hearing…It does not make sense. Visha was diligent, intelligent, and versatile. The perfect adjutant for anyone, soldier and politician alike. She would not hide this from me…would she?

She was always a dependable employee. Climbing the corporate ladder would be a walk in the park with that work ethic. No… Schlage must be exaggerating Visha's flaws: conflating her Tzarist-Imperial nostalgia with extremely radical anti-Republicanism. It has to be.

"Herr Schlage, I know I created an unnecessary burden upon you and the party but please, let me help you fix this…I want to do you justice-" I protested, reaching into my bag to retrieve Moscic's letter. It was meant for Herimann's eyes only but circumstances have changed.

"Justice? Your army of delusional monsters has rioted across the country, Communists and National Vanguardists are on the verge of enacting their revolution upon us, and you aided a military man to overthrow a sister republic. What do you mean by justice?" Schlage demanded, snatching the letter out of my hand before reading it.

His eyes were set alight by the contents as if he were a priest reading a heretical manuscript.

"DO YOU TAKE ME FOR AN IDIOT?!" He threw it back at my face.

"I know these past two months were extremely unpleasant but I need to be reinstated in the DDP for our efforts to succeed. Please, we need to work together on this." I implored him as I caught the letter.

"I think our business is done here. You should leave."

"But-"

"If you do not leave immediately, I will call security for your physical removal." Schlage threatened. He did not even break from the impromptu staring contest. This is a terrible rut to be in; he truly meant it.

"Is there any way I could make this up to you?" I pleaded one last time. This cannot be happening!

Another heavy sigh emerged the DDP leader. For the longest time, he stared at me as if I was the biggest piece of dogshit under his shoe.

"Go to Yugoslavia. Help our friends there, rehabilitate your image, and we can start over from the beginning."

So that was it then?

After everything I have done for the Germanian Democratic Party, the radio addresses, the speeches, the advice, and the training on the Reichsbanner Red-Black-Gold, and this is the gratitude I was given? The alleged failures of a subordinate being placed upon the manager…

Usually, a low-ranking salaryman would feel the burn from the higher-ups, but I am the one getting roasted over a skewer. Being made into the scapegoat for the company to cover itself.

I still question the wisdom of terminating my future participation with the party. Don't they understand how much of an asset I was to their campaign? The campaign posters are inclined to agree. Now they're a liability to Schlage; he will have to spend a pretty penny replacing every ad that bore my name or face.

But it was too little, too late. The election was just a breath away; the voters had already committed to a party. There are very few things in the world that could force them to change their minds. Though, perhaps the boycott would be one of them. No doubt every politician, philosopher, and college professor in the future would use this event as an example of mass hysteria.

It is bad enough that the tragedy of this anarchic event would serve as ammunition for any opportunistic politician of this age decrying the inherent instability of democracy.

I laughed quietly to myself though it sounded more like a whimper. Now I know what it's like being the person sitting across from my desk in Japan.

Unemployed, with no reliable income, blacklisted from the establishment, and theoretically homeless; too old to return to the orphanage but just old enough to vote. Maybe I could find where my real mother was and crash at her place.

But given that she was most likely a prostitute, it would do more harm than good for my character. Then again, with Fascists and National Vanguardists "preaching" under my good name, it might be a desirable alternative.

I digress, however, the important thing to do now is to retrieve my belongings and go to Yugoslavia. If helping that Balkan kingdom is the only method to get into the good graces of the DDP, then so be it.

As for Visha…

'A party of Judeans and Liberals…' A warning unsaid but repeated in my head for eternity, spoken in Visha's voice, full of concern and subdued derision.

Sleep will evade me tonight.

As for the city…

Hate.

Fear.

Hunger.

The triumvirate that ruled Berun. Other than the sorry state of the small businesses getting trashed and the Freikorps harassing anyone wearing red or brown, were the throes of people still living in destitution as if wartime rationing never left the civilian world. Evidence that despite all the sound ideas and terrific advice I offer to the Progressive Bloc, full recovery cannot happen, much less in one year.

Everything seemed to have derailed all at once: the programs that the SPD have implemented to aid the impoverished were stunted, the ruination of simple market activity shot down the delicate trust the country has fought to earn from the foreign investors, and what remains of peace and stability was marred by tanks and field cannons blockaded entire avenues.

Even though Rohr's retreat from Berun was unobjectionable, his absence was only temporary…if he doesn't take over, the Reds will.

Perhaps I should move to the Unified States and escape the madness consuming the country. I laughed at the thought. I have no friends across the pond; the moment I land in New Amstreldam, the Americans will have me over to the Francois. My date will be the guillotine before the year is over. If I could try to engrain myself in the American Armed Forces, perhaps they would protect me…A very optimistic outcome - too optimistic. The American Military-Industrial Complex may not yet reach the levels of influence in Congress…

Perhaps exile in South America?

I heard Rio de la Plata is doing good at this time of year…would the government protect me from Entente retribution? The country lacked the leverages the Unified States had over the alliance nor had a large following of "fanatics" that would protect me thick and thin.

Maybe I should live in Daneland. I liked the Prime Minister there though that would put me near General Unger. I rather not his neighbor again...

Finally, I arrived at my office; the building was a small storefront closed down during the Great War. The previous owner died in the trenches on the Ionzo Front while his family perished during the food shortages. Despite the humble size, it was big enough for a conference room, a couple of office spaces, and an apartment space for me and Visha. After spending 8 years together, fighting and killing, being roommates and political coworkers was only natural.

The sight of bullet holes, broken glass, and a machine gun nest guarding the entrance suggest anything but a continuation of that life.

"Heil Degurechaff!" Over a dozen sentries shouted, greeting me with an angled Roman Salute while their high-pitched voices suggested that they were still teenagers. Their helmets were slightly too big for their heads. What was also curious were their black uniforms with yellow armbands depicting the Black Dragon.

"We thought you were dead." One of them commented.

"Oh really?" I smiled, I felt my brain ready to pop at any moment.

"Many people kept saying that you were killed in Konigsberg. I didn't want to believe it but then again, many people did want you dead…"

Giving a polite grunt, I brushed past these wannabe soldiers and marched into headquarters. I was immediately greeted with the stench of blood, sweat, smoke, and gunpowder in the conference room. It was filled to the brim with men and women, Germanians and Slavs alike, wearing the same black uniform and shouting over each other the latest developments in Saxony and Westphalia.

The only exception was Zettour and his clique of Preussian officers, dressed in their imperial garb in all its finery. He was conversing with Visha, who was wearing a stahlhelm and the same black attire as the sentries outside, it was as if she was in 1924 all over again.

Elena, however, spotted me first and made herself scarce, brushing past me at the doorway with a sly smile and a wink before exiting the building completely to wait outside. I didn't pay much mind to what her gesture meant as my eyes were solely on Visha. What was she arguing with Zettour about?

I failed to notice the room had gone silent when the crowd turned to look at me in mild joy and disbelief. I couldn't hear their laughter, their war cries, their chanting nor did I care about their right arm extending outwards though Zettour and his followers gave the more traditional military salute. As for Visha…

Her face was wrecked with fear, regret, adoration, and pure, unfiltered joy. Her smile was brighter than the sun, her eyes sparkled more than any star in the night sky, and her voice broke through the silent din like foghorn calling to a lost ship close to shore.

"Heil Degurechaff! For the Empire! For Germania!"

Instead of the calmness that her voice usually brings, I felt nothing but dismay and turmoil. It must have reflected upon my face as the room grew deathly silent again as everyone awkwardly stood tall minus the shuffling of the feet and a few polite coughs.

"Get out," I commanded, leaving no room for respite in my words. "Get Out! Work Day is Over. Go Home."

Everyone looked at each other as if to check they were hearing the same words.

"GET! OUT! ALL OF YOU!"

That prompted them to flood past me like rats feeling like a sinking ship.

"Not you." I reached out to squeeze Visha's wrist but my eyes were locked in a duel with Zettour. Instead of leaving, he remained defiant and remained in his position looking down upon me.

"This will be a private conversation," I explained to the old general.

No words left his mouth, nothing but a raising of an eyebrow. He thinks this is amusing but I am in no mood for games.

"Please, Herr Zettour. We can talk tomorrow, earliest at your convenience if need be."

"Very well." he acquiesced, feeling snubbed despite his status as the 'wise elder.' "I will hold you to your word."

I breathed a sigh of relief when the Junker left. Despite everything she did, I would rather spare her the humiliation in the eyes of the man who reduced our lives to tokens waiting to be spent in a casino.

Keeping my ironclad grip on Visha, dragged her over to an empty seat and sat her down on it. To her credit, she did not protest but kept a cautious optimism like so many aspiring college interns seeking entry into the corporate world, unaware of the snakes underneath their feet.

I removed her helmet and threw it in a corner, causing something to crash but I didn't care anymore.

I simply pace around the room some more, gathering my thoughts, and occasionally glancing at the battleplans to see the latest troop movements. After several gulps of air, I finally turned back to face her for answers.

"What did you do?"

"I…I - what needed to be done." she gulped.

"Explain."

"I feared for the worst…"

"That is not what I am asking for."

"I did what I thought would make you proud! You said I was ready! When you went to Pullska, I set to work gathering allies and old friends to build our movement to take down the Spartakus and National Vanguardist threats. I created networks, I sought out favors, I did everything to be prepared…and when you were attacked by Judeans in Konigsberg, I realized I had to act."

"Answer my question." I reached out and grabbed her by the chin to force her to look up at me. "What happened here?"

"We planned for a boycott when Foerster revealed that the Sozis have sought your demise. But ever since you left the country, our position has been under attack from within. Erbel and Herimann have been working behind your back and made arrests of some key allies in the Reichstag on false charges. I was excluded from conferences with Schlage or Berning; Elena found difficulty coordinating with their campaign offices; and even Weiss complained that the weapon shipments promised by the Czechs were often delayed and halfway emptied upon arrival. We were in the dark and had to conduct our own meetings to compensate."

"Foerster…" I repeated slowly. Where did he get that stupid idea from? Just where? Why?

"The boycott was supposed to be on the 6th but upon hearing the news of Pilsud's putsch in Warchau, I pushed for the event to move forward as soon as possible to prevent any potential retaliation from the Progressive Bloc…It was fortunate for us that there were many Germanians who did not need much convincing to express their anger for the betrayal by the politicians."

"Fortunate?" I gestured my head towards the Freikorp convoy outside the window. "It is anarchy out there. We may not have a safe election this year because of what you did."

"If the traitorous Socialists delay the election, it is because they fear us, fear you. Because they know - they know that they will lose. They are nothing without us! Rohr. Lutzebuerg. Either of them would be sitting in Herimann's chair right now if it weren't for Freikorps Degurechaff. You

are the only person who can save us! And I did everything I could do to ensure that you needed to win."

"This is not about victory!" I let go of her face to pace around the room once more. Picking up a half-empty vodka bottle, I smashed it against the wooden wall near Visha's head. "I was struggling enough trying to do what is right; this is about basic human decency. People are getting massacred; the Judeans receiving the worst of all."

"Why do they matter?" Visha protested indignantly, "Their voting power is the only value they have to us. The Judeans were only holding us back; preventing us from reaching our true potential. They were in the way of our destiny!"

SMACK!

My hand was faster than my eyes and within a second, I saw my most trusted friend out of her seat and sprawled on the floor with tears in her eyes, blood dripping from her nostril, and a red mark on her cheek. At that moment, however, I felt great pride that there was unflinching defiance within her. Eight years of man-made hell did not make her break easily…so I kicked her in the belly and ribs before stamping my boot on her neck.

"Visha…there are consequences for tormenting, even killing an entire people…" I told her, shame, disgust, and sorrow slowly creeping over me like a plague.

"Why?" Visha demanded, not bothering to struggle out of that unflattering position, half-crying and half-seething, "We have been killing Judeans since antiquity and they have always come back! How do you know?"

"HOW DO YOU KNOW?!"

Her voice roared inside my mind like a thousand artillery shells exploding at once.

"Do. You. Really. Want. An. Answer?" I replied softly to her. It was an empty threat but it got the job done.

Silence prevailed Visha, looking silent, pale, and altogether horrified yet curious.

It was extremely hypocritical for me to lecture her like that. Even I must admit that I am not as knowledgeable in this field as I should be right now. Japanese history books always painted a very favorable light on the Imperial Era and it was disturbing enough to confront the realities of the Imperial Japanese Army in China and the rest of Asia and the Pacific alone. Realities that I was merely scrapping the surface of; everything was brushed under the rug, told through half-truths, and presented through a conservative perspective. It was a great shame that Japan itself, my beloved homeland, did not incentivize the engagement needed to address its "dishonorable" conduct in World War II compared to what I have heard Germany has done.

And I knew even less about what happened in Europe.

Germany had sought to dominate Europe militarily, now they are doing so economically as the leader of the European Union. They were divided for the duration of the Cold War, puppets of the Russians and the Americans, and emerged from the era more united and prosperous than before. They were disarmed and forced to renounce war but all that money that could have gone into military spending was invested in more productive sectors, raising the standard of living for all Germans. They had sought to eliminate the Jewish people and now Germany and Israel operate as great friends.

Germany lost land and ended up becoming the strongest economy on the continent. Just like Japan. We lost Korea, Sakhalin, Taiwan, and the Kuril Islands and we became the fourth-largest economy in the world. We became loved by the Americans, a former enemy now a valuable protector. We suffered two atomic attacks, countless firebombings, and the prospect of invasion and emerged as one of the leaders of scientific innovation and discovery. Our contributions to world culture and technology are unparalleled; the center of global trade after engaging in many massacres across the Asian continent.

Was it criminal for a nation to be so peaceful and prosperous despite having imprinted a dark stain in history?

"I don't want you to become hated. HATED. There is enough misery in this world already…We have already gone through Hell in the Rhineland, we don't need to bring it with us in Brandenburg." I told her.

Even with all the lucrative trade deals my company in Japan engaged in with the South Koreans and the Chinese, we could not escape the scorn they had for us.

Taiwan was the same: there were some KMT Old Guards who had not forgotten nor forgiven what Japan did to the Republic of China. How my homeland enabled Mao Zedong to usurp national leadership after the War's conclusion.

I do not need to hear their words; their eyes alone indicated well enough that Japan will not have that solidarity that Germany enjoys in the European Union. There will be no friendship in East Asia ever again, not when so many atrocities have been committed. Japan was fortunate, or unfortunate, enough to live under the American Nuclear Umbrella to avoid spiteful retaliation.

"Let them hate us. They hate us because they know we were in the right and they were wrong," she muttered, her words seemed more directed towards deluding herself than convincing me. "They hated us for who we were and what we stood for. I grew up knowing they will forever hate us and I care not for their concerns."

"No. You don't want that, Visha. It will only make everything worse." I shook my head, removing my foot and allowing her to return to the seat. "You don't want that at all. You do not know what you seek."

"Why did you do this?" I wanted to her reasons, no matter how irrational.

"Because I love you." She answered, trying to smile through her tears. "I would do anything for you."

"I would die for you."

"I would kill for you."

"And I killed because I love you."

These are dangerous words, Visha. You should not have said them. They are the Holy Grail for any aspiring tyrant seeking to dominate all life on Earth.

Oh Visha, why did you say them?

"I lost my Home. My God. My Culture. My Country…to-to the Reds." She sobbed into my hands, grabbing onto my wrists like a lifeline. "I don't want you to lose yours…becoming a foreigner in a foreign land. Tolerated but never truly welcomed…I didn't feel I belonged in the Empire until I met you. After the Great War, I returned to my family to see the house half-empty and the other half starving."

"I thank God every night that I had met you…"

I quickly shook my head. Being X, damn you…Everything would be settled so much easier if you had shown anger instead, Visha. Anger and rage I can handle, not…this.

"This is not love…" I said, causing Visha to whimper and squirm. "This is not love…this is an illusion of love. I am not who you think I am. I am not the messiah you seek. I was just a simple soldier in the Empire."

Instead of sorrow or wrath, she laughed, a weak, tearful laugh, choking on her spit in the process. It was rather terrifying to watch the fear vanish from her eyes.

"This is nothing simple about you, Major. You are unnatural…A living Saint. A Paragon. No common soldier could perform the same missions with equal vigor and foresight as you…You never lost a battle, you evaded death at every turn, and you displayed power not seen in the last 1000 years…Not since Charlemange...St. Jeanne d' Arc -"

"Cease these delusions." I struck her cheek again with my hand. However, instead of evading, Visha held her ground and endured the blow with an open smile. "Do you realize I was expelled from the Germanian Democratic Party? What you have done to this country? Do you realize what you have cost me from your idiotic sense of grandeur?"

"Expelled?" Her joy quickly faded into disbelief. "Schlage was not supposed to do that."

"YES! What you did and planned out over the past few weeks was taking a knife and stabbing it into my spine. How can you look at the current state of the country and consider it a success? We had everything going right for us! And you ruined everything!"

"Schlage was not supposed to do that…" Visha repeated, her eyes lost in deep thought. "He was not supposed to do that…"

"Well, he did," I told her with a heavy sigh. "Are you happy? Do you feel proud?"

"No…"

"No indeed." I turned to look towards the door. "ELENA! Get in here!"

Visha suddenly looked up at my face and the entrance with color draining from her face once again. Like a Grim Reaper, Elena appeared with a ghost of a smile and a Luger pistol in her hand; her eyes was instantly directed at Visha's head. This immediately prompted her to fall to her knees and grab onto my ankles like a woman possessed.

"PLEASE. Please." She sobbed pathetically over my boots; her tears could flood oceans. "I don't want to disappear from your life! Please, don't make me disappear…Everything I did, I did it for you…"

"Do you require my assistance in removing her, dear leader?" Elena asked nonchalantly.

"No," I replied, kicking Visha in the face to get her to let go. "I want to know why YOU have not alerted me of the degrading stupidity that is going on within the Freikorps?"

"Because I was working under the assumption that Visha was carrying out your vision. I felt no need to question Visha's leadership nor was she willing to explain how she reached her conclusions." Elena bowed, "I apologize for not approaching you first for verification."

"LIAR! LIAR!" Visha screeched, trying to lunge at our intelligence director with her hands outstretched but I put my foot down on her spine to keep her pinned to the floor. "Please, Major! You must believe me! She was also responsible! SHE told me that you would approve of my actions. Don't listen to her…"

Ignoring the squirming worm beneath me, I thanked Elena for her explanation but I had one last thing to say.

"Elena, from now on, let no one else claim ignorance as an excuse. This is the last order I can give as a member of the Germanian Democratic Party: find and locate the primary perpetrators and agitators behind the rioting and the vandalism, especially against Judeans. Purge them, rehabilitate them, it matters not to me; they must pay back the damages they have done to the people. Those that retain their wits; redirect their anger towards the real enemies of Germania: the Communists and the National Vanguardists. Not some imaginary foe to fulfill an imaginary agenda."

"With respect, dear Degurechaff," Elena bowed again, "The Junkers and the Fascists see the partnership with you as one of equals. This pursuit will be a breach of an established relationship. We act as political allies with them, after all."

"And allow their poison to continue to fester underneath my nose once again?" I retorted, adding steel to my words. "Tolerating their prejudices after today will not benefit anyone in the DDP nor the Progressives in general. Even now, they still find a way to weasel out of our agreements. They will either adhere to the democratic process and work with their fellow countrymen or that relationship is forfeit."

"But -"

"Class, Goering, Rudensdorf, even Il'in - they will need to understand that a new world is coming and they could either be part of it or be left behind. What is one more body to bury in the earth?"

"Very well." Elena nodded, flipping open her notebook to scribble my orders down. "But what about her?"

I looked down at Visha. Gone was her rage and replaced with overwhelming dread.

"What about her?"

"Are you not concerned about her future discretion?"

"You are not to harm a hair on her head, Elena." I removed my foot from Visha. "I will know if it's you. She is my…burden to resolve."

Elena frowned ever so slightly.

"But-"

"This decision is final. You are dismissed."

"But-"

"GO. HOME."

The frown deepened but Elena relented. She threw me the Roman Salute before exiting the building. Visha took the opportunity to pull herself off of the ground. She turned towards me wanting to express tearful gratitude but I was not in the mood.

"That includes you, Visha."

"Why?"

"WHY?!" I punched her into the wall, creating a human-sized crater in the wooden panels. "After everything I have told you, you still think you're innocent?! You are the most vindictive, cruelest, and insane person I have ever had the displeasure to work with…and to think I valued you so highly."

"Major…please. Don't send me away. I want to be with you for -"

"Go home, Visha." I dragged her over towards the doorway, "You created a mess that I have to clean up and I don't want you to get in the way of my goals."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, trying to reach out to hold me but I slapped her hand away.

"Don't come back until you are truly sorry for everything," I stated, a thousand emotions welling up in my throat. "Because…I wanted you to be the best person you can be. I don't want you to destroy your…humanity...for me."

If it was only that easy to be a decent person in an indecent world…but after eight years of killing and surrounded by blood and carnage, I am beginning to wonder which one of us has gone insane.

But before Visha disappeared from my eyes, I couldn't help but call out to her.

"Was there not a single dissenting voice when you organized this boycott?" I inquired softly with a hint of iron underneath.

"It was Secretary-General Lergen." She answered ruefully.

"Don't lie to me, Visha. It is bad for your health." I said aloud.

Lergen would never be in the same room as her if he knew what was happening. He is too smart for that.

"It is true though. He was the only dissenter."

"How?"

"He made his opinion known and raised his hand last." She answered meekly. "The final decision was unanimous; I would not have carried it out otherwise. I needed full cooperation from everyone."

…

…

…

Lergen, you absolute fucking coward…

Chapter Sixteen - You Belong To Me

The couple of weeks after the election was quiet for Weiss.

Too quiet.

When he placed his ballot for the Germanian Democratic Party, it was announced that Degurechaff was no longer an associate of the Progressive Bloc. Talk about a wasted vote.

The open discourse of revolution was reduced to hushed tones when word got out that the Argent Silver was home safe, sound, and downright furious. It was terrifying to hear that the Communists and the National Vanguardists lined up at the voting booths like sheep being led into the slaughterhouse - Rohr, for all his drunken bravado, sobered up quickly in the face of the Argent Silver.

Visha was declared persona non grata by the Major herself. It was a very troubling affair to learn but he knew better than to question the wisdom of his superiors. Yet, he had not disagreed with the methodology and the enthusiasm employed by their favorite Russy.

But now that the Major was downcast - really downcast - as he had never seen her operate with such a sterile manner since returning from Westphalia, he could scarcely get a word in with her until now. She had spent the majority of her time denouncing the boycott, the violence, and Cossack brutality as she went on a brief tour to examine the damages done to vandalized shops and synagogues. A massive verbal flurry over the radio that was utterly scathing upon the ears.

Perhaps Randolf Jager was right, Slavic Lawlessness was poisoning Germania from within…more so than any Judeo-Cosmopolitanism that other nationalist ultraconservative pundits preach against, not that he paid attention to any of them. Regardless, the goal was to reunite the Empire, not establish the Second Russy Empire in Germania. Something the Cossacks failed to understand…

Speaking of, the Slavic boycotters were handed over to the police and the judicial courts for their crimes of vandalism and murder after the Major made a public announcement denouncing the violence. Unlike their Germanian counterparts who had sympathetic juries and judges who were cleared not guilty, the Slavs faced tougher sentences for performing the same crimes. Though, "tougher" would be an overstatement…there were traffic violations with greater penalties.

The newspapers that once praised the "actions of true patriots" for their boycott condemned the Russy Exiles the next day.

It was impressive how quickly everything was blamed on Slavic Lawlessness for inciting "racial disputes between the Germanians and the Good, Loyal, Judeans."

Of course, none of Rohr's men caught got persecuted since the fat drunk bastard controlled the largest paramilitary force in Europe.

But the most damning of all was how the Progressive Bloc blamed everything on Major Degurechaff. Weren't they the ones that got this country in the mire? Weren't they the ones who would benefit from sending the assassins after her in Konigsberg?

She said it was a complete coincidence that the Hammerstein Affair was exposed in the same timeframe and had nothing to do with the Konigsberg Incident. Weiss knew better than most that the Major would never deceive him but doubts continued to linger in his mind. Yet, a couple of times he had to reflect and remind himself of how he had already started believing the two events were intertwined despite knowing the true narrative. She was telling the truth.

After all, he was present in the secret conference.

Of course, one just had to look at Elena Muller to avoid further contemplation. As soon as Visha was gone, the half-Judean began overhauling the entire bureaucratic structure, purging the staff of Visha's old associates with her creatures. No one disappeared, yet. Just given polite encouragement to disassociate themselves from the Germanians. Nothing too alarming; Weiss didn't know who they were anyway on a personal level. But the results speak for themselves.

Everything was accelerating considering that Reichsbanner Drachen was on its own. But the principle remains constant: whatever Degurachaff says, goes. Which was why he was in a personal meeting with the Major.

"Major Degurechaff, I can never disobey any order from you," Weiss answered truthfully. Time and time again, he had placed his faith in the leadership of the Argent Silver and never once was it abused. "Whatever you ask, I shall do."

And yet, his response seemed to deepen Degurechaff's scowl. Did he say something wrong?

"I want you to know first that I am going to Yugoslavia."

What?

"Before you ask anything, I am not running away…I'm simply trying to make amends with the Progressives."

"You're wasting your time." Weiss blurted out before suddenly clamping his mouth shut.

Degurechaff was not joyous to hear his outburst when she stood up from her seat with her hands clenching into fists.

"Are you questioning my judgment?"

"No. Far from it," He shook his head, "I just don't think the politicians are worth your time."

"You do realize that those parties are the only ones that are working to create a functioning democracy? Rohr, Lutzbeurg, Class, and Goering; these demagogues would lead this country and its people down a path of ruination. Like it or not, Berning, Schlage, and even Herimann and Erbel have this country in their best interests."

Weiss kept his mouth silent though his eyes betrayed his inner turmoil. The Major was quick to catch onto it. Anger permeated the room and he felt like he was standing in the middle of a furnace.

"You still disagree. Why?"

"Permission to speak plainly?"

"I never considered you to be someone who withheld honest input. Was I wrong?"

Weiss's eyes glanced downwards, looking at his polished black jackboots, before looking back at the Freikorps commander. He wondered if he could survive when his words could not.

"The men in the Reichstag…they're worthless. They do not deserve your confidence. They are the real traitors to the Germanians. They colluded with the Soviet government, the same government that was content letting us starve to death in the Great War before entry. They do nothing but bicker and squabble with one another.

They do not know what we have sacrificed on the frontlines. They do not know what we have seen on the battlefield. And they do not care. They preach of Humanity, Peace, and a new Era. What did we get in reality? Mass unemployment, hunger, poverty, and national humiliation. We are buying Francois goods, not Germanian goods. We are supporting Francois businesses, not Germanian ones. We are enabling another Francian Empire, instead of looking after our own.

If you want to go to Yugoslavia, then go. But don't do it for those traitorous sellouts in the Reichstag, do it for yourself. I didn't follow you into Hell because you were a slave to the Brass, I followed you because you were the only officer who knew the truth."

Degurechaff looked rather offended but Weiss said his piece. He meant every word.

"The truth…" she grumbled, looking mournful yet so hateful. "Alright then, what do you think is the truth?"

"That you defend these men who plot your demise behind your back and turn around and attack those who wish to elevate you."

"Don't you dare bring Visha into this…" The Major warned, "Choose your next words carefully."

"Don't ignore the people who want to see you succeed. Don't forget their plights; they hoped against hope that we would finally triumph against the calamity…" He continued.

"Are you making excuses for her?! Are you conveniently forgetting what she has done? What she had orchestrated behind my back? I expelled her for the prejudices she hid under the veneer of a pollyanna, not for the Slav that she is, no matter what the media says."

"She did it because she was scared for you. It happened the way that it happened because you were the knot that held the country together. If her prejudices were the guiding principles of the boycott, every Judean in Germania would be dead right now."

"You say as if it was a good thing she showed restraint."

"Rohr had no such pretenses," Weiss countered, "He and his Brownshirts carved a bloody path to Berun, raping and murdering every Judean got his hands on. Visha smashed the windows of synagogues, but Rohr razed them entirely. He called it 'Workers' Justice' when he plundered Judean businesses to stuff his own pockets."

Would you rather have him directing the boycott? His words seem to imply.

"What are you really saying?" Her eyes narrowed and her gaze sharpened.

Glancing downwards again, the tall veteran mage tugged subconsciously on his yellow armband.

"When the Albish blockaded the North Sea, there was no longer enough food to go around. First, my family ate the horses. We weren't going anywhere, couldn't feed them and neither could the Army. Then they ate the family cats; including my cat, Felix. Then they ate the family dogs; loyal, strong, and dedicated but they ate them anyway. Then the rats. My mother traded half her jewelry for a sack of potatoes and my father gave up the family ancestral sword just to get a pound of meat.

When I came home, I realized it was no longer my home. My parents gave away so much wealth to find food that they had to move into a smaller, more humble manse.

My family was part of a distinguished line of cavalrymen. We have fought for Konig and Kaiser since the days of the Holy Roman Imperium. The Kaiser demanded loyalty and so we gave him loyalty. The Kaiser demanded sacrifice and so we gave him sacrifice. When the Kaiser surrendered, we surrendered. When the Kaiser fled, we stayed.

We stayed and swore loyalty to the Republic. When the Republic demanded we give up our pride, we gave them all we had left. When the Republic demanded to give up our money, we

gave them all we had left. When the Republic demanded that we give you up, I only realized that we would have nothing left.

I joined the military because duty demanded me to serve my country. Just as it had demanded from my forefathers. I surrendered because duty demanded me to. Betrayed or not on Armistice Day, I did my duty and gave up.

But now that these Liberals and Socialists parade the Freedom of Choice, I choose the Empire and only the Empire."

"You want the Kaiser back?" She inquired with a heavy sigh, slumping back into her seat in the process.

"I want you." Weiss knelt before his superior like a knight of yore, "Only you."

"You believe I am fit to be the new sovereign?"

"There is no one better."

"I'm just a soldier, Weiss. Like you. Don't you find it ironic to crown a young woman - being a reactionary?"

"No."

"And if you were wrong? If the Empire came back and rejected me?"

"Then we will simply build a new Empire."

"That is what I was afraid of…" The Major grumbled under her breath, glaring at the mirror sitting in the corner of the wall. It looked as if it made contact with an angry fist. "I am not sure I can do this anymore…"

"You still can: you have the strength and the knowledge. You just need an opportunity. The opportunity that we can give you if you just give us a chance." Weiss implored her. "Have faith, Major. You can accomplish so much more."

Silence governed the room and he could have sworn he saw his war hero retreat within her eyes. Where was the fire in her soul? Never had he seen the Argent Silver so dull, lifeless, and rusted. Just when he had gotten acquainted with the quieter side of the Major in the past few days. Weiss strained his ears trying to catch the slightest noise emitting from her mouth. If he had said these thoughts differently, perhaps he would have garnered a more positive reception.

"What did you know of Visha's plan for the boycott?" The Ace of Aces finally spoke again. The tiredness in her voice nearly split Weiss' heart in two.

"I was the one who suggested the boycott," Weiss answered truthfully, and just like that, like a flash of lightning, the spark of life compounded with a godly fury returned to her sapphire-rich eyes.

"And you didn't tell me…"

"It was far from ideal, I know, but current circumstances led me to believe it was the best possible outcome we had. We could control public opinion if we could control the narrative. Let's face it, Major. Someone was going to talk about Konigsberg eventually. It was for the best that we heard about it first for we could at least dictate the constraints for the inevitable outrage."

Another minute of silence passed between them before Tanya spoke again.

"What do you plan on doing next while I am in Yugoslavia?"

Is this a trick question? Weiss kept his mouth shut in case it was. Elena had plenty of eyes and ears throughout Germania and he rather not face an early, permanent retirement from Degurechaff's movement.

"I am not trying to deceive you…" she sighs, "I just want to know what you are planning next."

"It is entirely dependent on what you want us to achieve while you are gone," he replied. "What would you have me do?"

"If I tell you, can you promise me something?" She asked.

"I am not sure I have anything else to give you." Weiss shook his head slightly. "You have my sword, my loyalty, and my life."

"Can you give me peace? Give me stability? Some goodwill?"

"I can certainly try."

"I suppose that is good enough for me."

That tore a big hole in Weiss's pride. Even after all those victories earned in the Great War, she still sees men like him as mediocre.

"You will succeed Visha's position; assume her duties as my new adjutant. Find the most trustworthy men to oversee background checks of the Freikorps. No more boycotts or anything of the sort." The Major said, much to Weiss' surprise.

Elena Muller has been aiming to take over that role ever since Visha's fall. She would not take kindly to this new arrangement; this promotion would put him firmly in her sights.

"Why not Elena?" he asked as innocently as he could.

"She has enough responsibilities on her plate. Quite frankly, I don't trust her as much as I trust you."

"I am truly blessed. My deepest gratitude."

"Right…regardless, despite your…conservative mindset, I still want you to cooperate with the democratic establishment. Work to preserve the Republic from domestic threats and bring order back onto the streets."

Pardon? Despite everything he has told her, she still wanted to associate herself with them.

"Even if they do not want our help?"

"Even if they do not want our help."

Quite a tall order but there were victories won from less-than-favorable circumstances.

"I will do all that you command to the best of my ability." He swore an oath, raising his right arm for the salute.

"You can start by stop doing THAT." Degurechaff marched out of her seat to pull his arm down. "Why does everyone keep doing that?"

"Elena insisted on the political pageantry…"

"Elena? What-why?"

"When you were in Pullska, she stated in a report, a lecture to be precise, going over her observations and theories of Rohr's Arbeitsgemeinschaft and its recent success. And…um…Elena concluded that if we don't adopt similar methods of mass mobilization, we will not win popularity. She strongly argued that reputation alone cannot build a movement." Weiss explained the best he could. As if it was not already clear enough that politicking and campaigning was not his specialty.

The most quizzical face washed over Degurechaff as she studied his face like a prison warden reviewing a new convict. Brings back memories of training camp…looking back now, Weiss found it silly that his younger self was so terrified of Degurechaff as drill sergeant; if it weren't for her exercise regime, he may not have seen the war's conclusion.

"I will look into this later…" she finally huffed, earning pity from the First Lieutenant.

"Are there any other concerns you want me to address in your absence?"

"All decisions regarding the direction and structure of the Freikorps must have my explicit approval first. Send a letter or wait for my return, all actions from here on out are to assist the Germanian Republic, NOT to recreate the Empire. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"And if Vis - Viktoriya comes back…" The Major's voice seemingly died in her throat.

"And if Viktoriya comes back?"

"Tell her to wait for me to return."

"Of course."

"And Weiss?"

"Yes, Major?"

"Was Lergen present in the meeting with Viktoriya?"

"Yes, he was. So was General Zettour."

Tanya von Degurechaff. Such a strange little girl. A strange, brilliant, dangerous little girl. The culmination of a thousand years of Germanian culture, knowledge, and martial tradition; she has a knack for exceeding expectations.

How the Empire lost the War with her in service was the Eighth Wonder of the World…

How quickly a decade came and went to Zettour's aging eyes. Like his old brother-in-arms, Rudensdorf, he witnessed the meteoric rise of the Empire during his youth and worked to defend its honor as a man, only to live in its carcass as an elder. Everything feels like a dream…or a nightmare.

The Liberal.

The Socialist.

The Judean.

The Queer.

They are all thieves.

Stealing the glory and the riches of the Empire that they did not earn. Prestige was won through the sword. Honor through blood and iron. These cowardly pacifists denounce the martial heritage of the Imperial Knights yet continue to live within the walls of the Empire like parasites and vermin. After all these centuries, they still mock the countless sacrifices of the men and women who built this country using their bones as bricks and blood as cement.

Mocking the brave warriors of Germania while having the audacity to complain of many "injustices." Zettour has never seen such ingratitude before. The Empire was the most progressive and egalitarian nation in Europe, perhaps even more so than the Americans. Yet they still dare to complain. Being a soldier was a thankless job, that part was true, but the contempt that these idiots have against the Empire was most infuriating.

If they don't like it here, then by all rights, they can leave.

Let the Judean go to America, and see how the Klan welcomes them.

Let the Socialist go to Rus, and see how the Bolsheviks treat their own.

Let the Liberal go to Francia, and see how the Parliament uses them.

Let the Queer go to Albion, and see how the Albish views them.

The Empire was perfect; functioning as intended, but these problem-seekers desired nothing but to enact their hedonistic utopia on Earth. The destruction of his beloved country was not an act of God, Zettour would know, as there are at least ten good souls in the Empire with Degurechaff being one of them.

But the pride and the ego of these fools…they chose to destroy the Empire rather than be content living in it and dare act as if they were the victims of some unforeseen calamity.

Everyone has a role in society yet many are content being useless.

It is no wonder European Civilization has gone to hell.

But hope is not lost. There is at least someone with the strength and will to overcome this new dark age. She just needs guidance.

"I must apologize for not coming to you earlier." Tanya von Degurechaff greeted him with the proper military salute.

Hans von Zettour replied with the same gesture. It is good that she still respects tradition, unlike some people in Germania. Giving a nod to the butler, the servant brought forth fresh black coffee, tea, biscuits, and cakes.

"There's nothing to apologize for…" The old veteran shook his head while offering a slice of Flandern chocolate deluxe. "Eat."

"No thank you. I am not hungry right now." She shook her head politely.

"I wasn't asking. EAT. It is rude to refuse a host's hospitality."

The polite demeanor Degurechaff wore was dampened by a streak of defiance yet she took a small bite of the cake before setting aside the plate. While Zettour may not appreciate his subordinates acting out unaccordingly, her feistiness was rather enduring. He couldn't help but smile in her presence.

"So…what do you want to talk about?" She spoke her words calmly and slowly. "Since we last met."

"Since we last met? Those concerns became irrelevant given the current situation. Being ostracized and banished from the Germanian Democratic Party - that was madness - madness and stupidity governing the halls of the Reichstag…Heimal Schlage was blind and deaf not to realize how special you were to him."

"Yes…he didn't want to listen. I just want to explain what I could do…"

"Indeed, despite everything you have done for them, they eventually hated you. You offered them blood, sweat, and tears, and repaid you with an unmindful exile. Never have I seen such an unruly display by the leftists. Don't you understand, Tanya von Degurechaff? They were only using you."

"Using me?" She arched an eyebrow.

"Judging by the election results alone, the Progressive Bloc, in a coalition with the DNVP and other conservatives, holds a dominant majority in the Reichstag with Heinrich Berning as the new Chancellor. An unpleasant man to work with; how do you think your life would turn out being slandered by our new government?" Zettour inquired.

"Not very comfortable."

"Not very comfortable indeed, your knowledge and honor made them look weak. The Republic punished you for it. At least in the Empire, we rewarded patriots for their virtues."

Degurechaff simply shrugged her shoulders and let out a sigh.

"The Empire doesn't exist anymore so we'll have to make do."

"And what do you plan to do next?"

"To put simply, I will go to Yugoslavia, clean up the kingdom, and come home with enough goodwill to rejoin the Progressive Bloc."

"How fascinating. How do you know it will work? After all, their expansion in the Reichstag is the direct result of your contributions. If they did not appreciate you then, what makes you think they will appreciate you in Yugoslavia?"

The silence was Degurechaff's only reply. While such a response would have been a victory for the elder, it felt like a defeat - a loss more humiliating than Triano. His idol and muse was a beacon of initiative and forthright and to see her in such a state gave uncomfortable reminders of his granddaughter in this new world. Like so many of the youth of Germania, Degurechaff looked lost, hopeless, and robbed of their careers and aspirations.

So meek, so vulnerable…

"I will not take insult if you do go to Yugoslavia." Zettour walked over to place his aging hand on the shoulder of his greatest hero. "You are helping our fellow countrymen in these trying times. I could not ask for anything more - never had I seen anyone so selfless and loyal to the Empire. I just want you to know that you still have a home in Germania."

"Home…" Degurechaff repeated sarcastically, peeling off the old general's hand. "Is it still my home?"

She looked up and glared daggers at the man and he swore he saw a demon smiling in her eyes.

"They're trying to get rid of you by sending you into Yugoslavia." Zettour warned.

"Just like how you're trying to get rid of Judeans?"

His stoicism did not waver.

"Now, we get to it." He nodded in acknowledgment, "What do you wish to know?"

"I want to know why."

"To protect your honor - to protect Germania's honor - the honor all of the brave men and women that died to protect our nation."

"Is that the reason or the excuse?"

"Whichever you prefer."

A brief pause existed between the two veterans and although her face was blank, Zettour knew that the bloodlust returned to Degurechaff's eyes. Like a beast, violent and unbreakable, a terror to millions of soldiers in the Great War.

"You ignored my warnings." She said slowly.

"I didn't ignore them. I just held off from adhering to it."

"Why?"

"Because you offered nothing in return."

"Nothing? Was our relationship always so transactional?"

"Ever since you joined the Germanian Democratic Party and betrayed your true benefactors in the Germanian National People's Party, yes it was. How else am I supposed to know you held Germania's best interests in heart?"

"Are you accusing me of degradation of the Republic?"

"Never; merely stating the simple reality that you were aiding the wrong party."

"The DDP is not the 'wrong' party."

"Then why did you get expelled?"

Once again, another pause.

"It's…Viktoriya. She…cost me everything." she murmured, lustful murder lurking under her breath.

"A consequence of uplifting the ignoble above her station," Zettour remarked, reclining in his luxurious red velvet chair. "Her feminine approach to leadership left much to be desired in your absence - perhaps you should have placed good Germanian officers like Weiss instead before you left. You have seen what happens when you make Slavs leaders of men."

Under the savage gaze of Degurechaff, the likes that sent legions of soldiers in a panic flurry, was certainly an odd feeling. By all rights, Zettour should be terrified of staring down a dragon but he felt nothing; he was as calm as a lighthouse enduring a hurricane…

Somehow, her brutality enhanced her beauty in a hypnotic portrait of wrath and purity.

"The rhetoric that you have been spewing since the war - behind my back - is a disgusting mockery of free speech…" Degurechaff spat. "It is criminal!"

"In the eyes of the institutions of both the Empire and the Republic, I have breached no legalities."

"But I still have the right to demand -"

"Nothing. You demand nothing from me, Frau Degurechaff." Zettour scowled. "This is my empire and my empire alone."

Her small hands balled up in cute little fists; her nails digging into the skin of her palm just enough to draw a hint of blood. Immediately, she got up from the couch and proceeded to head to the main hallway of his mansion.

"You are not visiting Minister Lergen until we conclude our business here." the Preussian Junker called out to the blonde veteran. "You will not see him without my consent."

Like a beast dragged by a chained leash, Degurechaff quietly returned to her seat, seething under her breath.

"Alright." She snarled, "What do you want?"

"I want you to listen to what I have to say."

"Spit it out. What is it?"

"A new career offer in the Germanian National People's Party. Just because you were removed from your role as the mediator for the Progressives does not mean you can't be a mediator for the Conservatives. Join the party and they can land you a spot in the Reichstag to preserve the stability in the Republic." Zettour explained with a slight smile. "They cannot hope to rule without conservative support and with you on the scene, they will have to listen to reason and sensibilities. You do not have to go to Yugoslavia…"

"And?"

"And I want the same…mutual understanding…that you had given to Herr Goering and Herr Class: in return for ceasing all rumormongering, I want a referendum over the return of the monarchy. But…"

"But?"

"I want your full support for it. Tomorrow or next month, I want the Ace of Aces to announce on the radio, in the newspapers, or on a public campaign demanding an Imperial restoration."

"Really?" One of her eyes twitched in bubbling anger.

"No more ambiguity between us, is that not what you desire?"

"Yes…"

"If you accept, I will allow myself to be feathered and tared by the Germanian people for spreading malicious slander of the Stab-in-the-Back myth. You have my honor and my word that I will come forth with the truth and apologize to the world." He continued.

"And if I refuse?"

"If you care about the Judeans, you will do what I say. Otherwise, this national boycott will be the beginning of the end for them. Whatever end that awaits them for leeching off the Empire and plotting to assassinate its greatest war hero once Rohr takes power."

As silent as a statue, Degurechaff rose from her seat, and looked at the various portraits and landscape paintings of the romanticized, idyllic martial history of the Germanic people, before glaring back at Zettour.

"No."

"No?"

"You heard me, General." she growled.

Not the most ideal answer he was looking for but so be it. There is always next time. She will come crawling back; he just needs to wait and see.

"Very well," The old general nodded, pulling himself from his chair. "I understand…I will let Lergen know of your impending arrival. He will be expecting you when you arrive at Bendlerblock."

"Assuming the Progressives will allow me anywhere near their bureaucracy." Degurechaff gave a crooked smile.

"No worries. The men of the Reichswehr are loyal to me, not the Reichstag. They will grant you entry."

"How comforting to hear, Herr Zettour." She remarked sarcastically before turning to leave.

"One more thing, Frau Degurechaff," He called out once more, and though she stopped in her tracks, she did not turn to face him. "Get that Judean half-breed out of your Freikorps; she is too dangerous to be allowed to operate so brazenly."

"I appreciate your concern and will be ignoring it. Goodbye."

This was it. No more hiding. No more delay. No more secrecy. When Erich von Lergen received a phone call from his dear friend, notifying him of the Devil's appointment with him, his heart had already plummeted to Hell. As if his life was already agonizing enough. He felt dirty leaking classified information to the Reichstag, he felt dirty exposing his mentor and stealing his job as the new head of the Reichswehr, and most importantly, he felt dirty that he enjoyed his new promotion.

Despite all the security afforded to him: secret microphones connecting to secret tapes, legions of infantry guarding every hall and corner of the Bendlerblock, and a hidden button underneath his desk specially designed to alert members of the Progressive Bloc of Tanya's presence; he felt more vulnerable than a man naked and exposed on the Rhineland Front. Lergen simply sat in his chair and waited. And he waited.

Waiting for the inevitable.

Distracting himself with paperwork did not provide the relief he wanted. The Treaty of Triano ensured that his burdens were light, straightforward, and quick to review. Given the sudden and vitriolic backlash towards the Progressive Bloc from the common soldiery due to Degurechaff's expulsion, ensuring a deep state within the Army on Zettour's behest had never been easier.

Suddenly, the door opened, and it revealed the woman of his worst nightmares. If he was a braver man, Lergen would have used his gun to shoot himself right there to avoid having a confrontation with her. But he did not. He simply laid down his pencil and brushed away his latest reports of the Reichswehr.

"General Lergen." Her eyes did not smile when her mouth did. Scorn and terror were the only thing he felt from her. "Congratulations on your promotion."

Slowly, but surely, Lergen felt his finger drawing closer, inch by inch, to the secret button just as she marched closer to his desk. Just press it, it screamed out to him. Just press the button. Help will come. Help will come and take her away. Take her far away so she will never scare him again. She will disappear if he presses that button.

Press the button, Lergen.

Just press the button and make her disappear.

"I was wrong about you." She spoke up; her cold, dead voice freezing his body in a place like some sort of spell. "I expected a man of great integrity, courage, and strength to see the truth and speak it. But you failed me. You failed everyone in Germania. Why?"

It was a simple question but it had so much weight.

"Because I was scared."

"Why? Are you scared of death?" her gaze narrowed in a frightful glare.

"No, I am scared of you."

Degurechaff's vengeful face suddenly grew melancholic and wistful; her wrath gone like mist dissolving under the morning sun. Her gaze was immediately downcast and withdrawn while she retreated into a nearby seat.

"How long were you scared of me?" She inquired. It was strange and terrifying to see her in such dismay.

"Since 1922."

"Is that why you didn't walk out of that secret meeting?"

Lergen nodded.

"You knew what I stood for," Degurechaff lectured him, "Didn't you say anything to dispel their delusions?"

"I did but-"

"But?"

"I was also scared of her."

"Who? Viktoriya? She is expelled. You don't have to -"

"No, it is Elena Muller," Lergen whispered, as if merely speaking the name would summon an apparition. "You should have expelled her instead."

Serebryakov, for all her flaws, is a useful brute and, like all Slavs, possesses a low cunning; nothing more than a cleaver or a hammer for Degurechaff to use against her foes and friends alike. A violent fanatic yes, but predictable too. Her cruelty could sleep and bloodlust sated for Degurechaff's voice was her prayer book. Serebryakov was a beast, but a tamed beast nonetheless.

But he still remembered his old friend's warning. Elena was too crafty for her own good, too enthusiastic to be part of Degurchaff's movement, and, if Weiss's assessment was correct, too ambitious to be content being a 'mere' secretary. She is a self-made orphan with an uncomfortably casual attitude towards inflicting murder and espionage.

"Elena?" She raised an eyebrow, seemingly unconvinced yet intrigued. "Viktoriya is the one that plotted the boycott."

"Elena Muller was the one who organized the meeting and seemed fully aware of what happened in Konigsberg. She was rather enthusiastic about the whole operation."

"Really now?"

"She stood to benefit the most from the boycott," Lergen remarked, "for her own aspirations. Whatever they may be."

"We could help each other," Degurechaff stated, leaning forward with innocent blue eyes, their color more royal than sapphires. "We can still turn this around."

"No. Not anymore."

"I can protect you, Lergen."

"That is a mistake, Degurechaff. Who is protecting you?"

The little monster murmured Serebryakov's name before holding her tongue from offering a retort. She simply slumped back into her chair, looking glum and half-dead. Strangely enough, it tore Lergen's heart in two. He would not say it aloud but he pitied her in that moment. She always had a plan, always had an idea…always thinking of the future. For all her bloodlust, her intelligence and leadership were unparalleled.

"You could protect me," she said quietly, hardly louder than a whisper. "We can protect each other."

"I can't do that, Degurechaff." He shook his head again. "I - I will not risk my career over you. You've made too many enemies in the new coalition. I must look after my own first."

"Lergen," She spoke up with a heavy sigh, "Why didn't you tell me about the meeting earlier? You know I would return to Germania immediately."

"I know. That's why Zettour and Muller wanted everyone to keep silent."

"You hid this from me?"

"I did send you a letter, through private channels, about the crude personalities of Serebryakov and Muller. I apologize for making it too vague but it was the best I could do."

"Oh…"

Silence pervaded the room as both parties stared at each other.

"What else have you hid from me?" She asked once more.

"Everything..." Lergen sucked in his breath as if it were his last. His hand finally moved away from the button to retrieve some classified documents.

"Was that Zettour's idea?" Her rage slowly crept back onto the surface.

"No…it was mine." He looked down on the hidden files as if the cruel numbers and testimonies would absolve him of his guilt. She was going to find out eventually but it was crucial that she would not know until after the signing of Triano. "These were from the Great War."

Though he showed her the papers, he gently brushed away her hand. The harsh details were not meant for her eyes after all. But Lergen did, however, read it to her in a quieter tone. Everyone had an idea of how grim the homefront was during the Great War. By his design and machinations, everyone but Tanya von Degurechaff and the 203rd Mage Battalion had an idea of how dire the situation was.

Ever since unification, the Empire enjoyed a massive population boom, eventually surpassing the Russy Empire and maintaining the lead over the later Russy Federation in Europe's largest population with the densest cities. With such an astronomically large labor pool, industrial production surpassed Francia, Albion, the Unified States, and the Soviet bloc combined by 1920. But that was not without a cost.

At first, the Great War was manageable, considering the naval superiority the Empire had over the Legadonian Entente and the Francios Republic, rationing was tolerable considering the trade lanes were open. But that all changed when Albion, Illdoa, and the Unified States entered the conflict, bringing forth an armada too vast for the Imperial Navy could ever hope to defeat in a single-pitched battle.

And so a blockade was established, putting the Empire dependent entirely on the good graces of Magna Rumelia and the Russy Federation for food and resources but they drove a hard bargain.

The Rumelians, while not a friend of the Empire, were close trade partners and heavily relied on Imperial engineers and technicians to assist in modernization. At the time, it was a fair assumption that the Rumelians would want to maintain that relationship, but the Empire was

outbid by the combined financial weight of Albion, the Francois Republic, and the Unified States. Although Magna Rumelia did not enter the war, the wedge the Allied Powers placed between the two nations did the trick. Thanks to Albish troops landing in Gallipoli and Athens, the Allies intimidated the government into submission. An embargo was eventually placed on the Empire with its assets and agents seized by the enemy.

The Russy Federation, in return for the wheat, coal, and oil trade, demanded to uplift the ban on the Communist Party of Germania, reserving a quarter of the Reichstag seats to them, and forbidding the police and corporations from breaking up labor strikes. The result was a near-breakdown in the war effort: workers in the factories and railroads were encouraged by the KPD to cease all productivity to protest the "illegal, imperialist war for capitalism." With the trains halted, food could not be delivered to the cities, and with no food, bread riots broke out. With the riots, the Communists urged a revolution to overthrow the monarchy.

When Zettour and Rudensdorf enacted a soft coup in Berun, the Soviets demanded Pullska and East Preussia be annexed by the Federation in return for maintaining the trade. They refused, of course. But that only ensured that the Red Army moved westward, crossing the border and marching straight into Warschau. Soviet disorganization and infighting as well as the spectacular efforts of the 203rd Mage Battalion and Degurechaff herself allowed the weakened Imperial forces to hold the line but only just.

No empire in history lives off of taxes alone and there wasn't enough arable land within the country to feed a population growing by one million babies a month at its peak. 85% of all food consumption was from imported goods, whether overseas or through the Russy Federation, and much was the same with the coal and iron ores. The Empire was producing far more than it could harvest and mine; trade was its lifeline.

By 1931, the Empire was a lion starving in a locked cage. The stockpiles of food and fuel simply ran out. No amount of careful rationing and self-sufficiency of the average citizen could stop the cost of attrition.

By 1932, two weeks before the Armistice, the Empire had become a walking skeleton. There were reports of cannibalism in poorer communities who could not afford an ounce of bread. The situation grew so atrocious that even the KPD pleaded with Moskva to halt its military operations and provide humanitarian aid. According to some anecdotes, Comrade Jughashvili "laughed upon hearing the news of the Imperial plight."

As for Francois occupation of the Rhineland and the lower half of Lothiern, rumors flew of their rule being particularly egregious and offputting. Especially when the rumors concerned the Imperial stronghold of Brussels; Francois expansionist ambitions into the Lowlands did not end with the Preussian-Francian War.

Just as the 203rd Mage Battalion was sent to put down an insurgent uprising in Arene, the Francois Republic was performing similar actions to crush Imperial resistance in Brussels. While

the destruction of Arene was indeed shameful, judging by numbers alone, Francois actions were even worse.

Arene was a thriving, prosperous city with a growing population, that part was undeniable, but its size was less than 300,000 residents. Meanwhile, Brussels, being the beating heart of Imperial industry, had well over a million inhabitants.

The Francois Army, whether out of a lack of discipline or encouraged by its commanders, led the pillage and desecration of Brussels. They plunder the city of its industrial machinery, wealth, and food supplies from the local populace in an attempt to destroy an underground resistance ring and strengthen the Republic's war effort. Arson, murder, and torture were frequently employed to break the Imperial spirit. Conservative estimates that 100k civilians were executed or murdered by the Francois Army; a further 600k were 'forcibly evicted' from their homes to be used as forced laborers. In addition, spies and refugees reported numerous instances of mass rape during the occupation. Initial estimates were placed between 40,000 to 90,000 women and children raped by the Francois due to how frequently the high command received these reports -

"Stop. Please, stop." Degurechaff interrupted, turning pale yet riled as if she were forced to sit on a pile of nails. "I was labeled as a war criminal for leading the assault into Arene while they get to act in open disregard for the law?"

"Allied propaganda power was stronger than ours. They controlled all communications with the outside world." Lergen replied glumly, "Together with the Albish, the Francois isolated news leaking from the city by exaggerating your actions in Arene. At least, that is how the General Staff concluded. No one in Berun believed the reports to be true until Imperial troops liberated the city and spoke with the locals there."

"Did the Americans know?"

"I suspected it was politically inconvenient for them to bring up the subject. Again, Francois propaganda efforts were successful in diverting attention to Arene instead of Brussels, even Imperial troops were swayed into thinking it was the bigger calamity."

"So why didn't you tell me?" Degurechaff asked calmly.

"Would you have surrendered if I did?" Zettour replied.

"Surrendered? I don't understand."

"Tanya…" he huffed, laying down his glasses before rubbing his temple, "Do you realize how valuable you were for the war effort? Every after-action report, every victory we hear, no matter how outlandish it was or how desperate the situation devolved into, you kept pushing forward, always forward. Your actions, your face, your words, you were all we had left to keep going, to

overcome the trap we have walked into. It was the only thing everyone looked forward to reading in the newspapers, on the radio, on every morning and every evening when all other Imperial battalions were lost."

It was the most depressing three years of his life during the final stages of the war. Not the worst nor the most stressful, it was the most depressing. The demon that he had grown to fear was the angel he needed most. The Illdoan Front was a hellhole, the Rhineland Front was a bottomless pit, the Legadonian Front was a nightmare, the Balkan Front was a slog, and the Pullskan Front was apocalyptic. Anything outside of Degurechaff's reports was nothing but misery, death, and decay. General Starvation and Colonel Disease were the new commanders of the Imperial Army.

"You were - are - the greatest thing that has ever happened to the Empire." He continued with a great sigh. "Never had anyone seen a soldier that acted so selflessly towards her nation; the modern Joan d'Arc, and it scared me how you managed to pull off these impossible maneuvers. It scared me that in our most desperate moments, grown men like me had to resort to sending a child like you to fight our battles. It scared me that it worked. Even in defeat, you are still victorious and it still scares me."

"How many lives were lost?"

"You already know the statistics on the military but at least 12 million citizens starved to death after the blockade though there are some who placed estimates as high as 22 million." Lergen looked down at a different ledger. "Combined with the military casualties, the Empire lost between 12% to 23% of its total population as we are still counting the dead. A real humanitarian disaster…"

"I still don't understand...why? Why did you hide these…reports from me during the war?" She inquired.

"Because I feared that we would have to put you down!" Lergan slammed the file shut. "For your own good and for ours, you had to be kept in the dark. We could not risk defeatism infecting the 203rd nor allow you to go on an eternal crusade. I feared that if I had told you the truth of the situation of the Home Front, you would not surrender. Such is your loyalty and devotion to the Empire, you would dedicate your whole life to killing the Francois and the Albish when we needed peace the most."

"You really believed that I would never hand over my rifle?"

"Anything is possible when it comes to you, Degurechaff. I had to prepare for the worst."

"Is there anything I can do to regain your trust?!" Her voice just came short of shouting.

Trust.

By all rights, Lergen was supposed to be the one to ask that question. After all, she had sacrificed so much during the war while he scribbled away on ledgers and charts behind the safety of Imperial walls. He was the one who led the effort to shelter her from the reality of the war, shelter her entire battalion, under some grand delusion that she alone could fix the Empire's woes.

Trust, Loyalty, Valor…Friendship…Oaths of loyalty…all worthless when convenient.

"It would be very good for me…most beneficial to you…if you stayed and took up Zettour's offer." Minister Lergen answered softly. "But, if you decide to leave to go to Beograd, let them know that I sent you there as well. I have colleagues in the kingdom who will provide the necessary armaments to assist in your endeavors."

"I…see." Degurechaff contemplated, "What else?"

"Please, you must also be mindful of Muller. She is the real threat, not Serebryakov."

"I understand that." She nodded, suddenly eyeing him with great suspicion. "May I ask why?"

"I feel that she would be a negative influence within your Freikorps." Lergen warned, though his mind had already moved to contemplate destroying the secret recording of this meeting.

"And why should I believe you?"

"Despite everything you have done, I still want you to succeed. For good or for ill, you deserved it more than anyone here."

"Anything else I need to hear?"

"Just know that there will be consequences upon your departure…"

Chapter Seventeen: Weimer Blues

"Where is Argent Silver?" President Kurt von Rudensdorf grumbled like a storm, chomping on his cigar like a stick made of salt. His fury was solely directed at his biggest rival and critic, Chancellor Heinrich Berning. "Where is my champion?"

It was a rhetorical question. Everyone knew why Degurechaff's face was absent in the Reichstag, Reich Chancellery, Presidential Palace, or anywhere else, but that didn't mean the Conservative Bloc liked it. Excluding the one person who could reach across both aisles to pass the necessary reforms has got to be Berning's most brilliant idea yet.

The power imbalance could not be more unsustainable: Degurechaff's expulsion eliminated any chance of reconciliation with the conservatives and although the Progressives gained the largest seats in the Reichstag - enough to form a majority government - it was already hemorrhaging support when its deputies began to defect towards the opposition. Their power base was built on a pile of sand over a sinkhole: the promise of the Argent Silver in public office.

The Communists won 24% of the National Vote while the National Vanguardists won 22% of the popular vote. If the Progressive Bloc couldn't form a majority government with the moderate right, it would have to be with either one of these extremist parties. Both of them were still hellbent on leading a revolution to overthrow the Republic and since the Ace of Aces was no longer present, they might just be brave enough to do that.

Meanwhile, the Fascist National Germanian Volkist Party obtained 8% of the vote. Altogether, the extremists carved a large margin in the Reichstag for themselves although the Fascist parties like the Volkist, led by Ludwig-Richter, moved to join the Conservative opposition.

"She is a Fascist whore and an enemy of Germania." Berning growled, "She will not be participating in our coalition, not while I'm here."

It was a good thing this conversation was not taking place in the Reichstag, a riot would have broken out, but this was supposed to be a meeting between the President, Chancellor, and cabinet members discussing matters of state such as reparations and a new budget. Instead, it only reinforced the ideological divide between pro-Degurechaff and anti-Degurechaff members; Conservatives and Leftists like borders on a map.

What Rudensdorf wouldn't give for his golden child to lead a putsch to overthrow his own government…

He never liked the idea of a Republic anyway and he liked it even less now that she had embarked on some foolish errand in Yugoslavia as if she was Berning's little maid.

The President-elect stuck a cigar back in his mouth to prevent his tongue from speaking something foul in response to Degurechaff's honor being insulted. Perhaps Rudensdorf should swallow his pride for once and concede to Berning to allow for a stable regime.

Germania was already suffering an economic and moral crisis, it could do well not to suffer a political one as well. He is the president, after all, entrusted to ensure a stable government and maintain the Constitution. Tempting as it was to dismiss the Reichstag and call for new elections, simple calculus dictated that nothing substantial would change without Degurechaff involved.

She was the only politician universally beloved and unspoiled by the rot set in.

And yet.

And yet…

Rudensdorf's mind drifted back to the era when he ruled the Empire, taking the reins of control away from the incompetent Kaiser and the dysfunctional Reichstag. The entire time, Heinrich Berning was his greatest naysayer; if he had shut up and stopped blocking the necessary legislation to uplift the war effort, Trianofication would never have happened.

If a ruling by decree would silence Zentrum and the Social Democrats, he might just do that, as distasteful it may be having to start his term in office by declaring an emergency…

"Enemy of Germania?" The President grumbled, "Stop treating Degurechaff like she is your private mirror."

"Mirror?!" The Chancellor was quite indignant, "She manipulated the public into wrecking the livelihoods of the Judean populace -"

"Oh great…enough about the Judeans. I am tired of hearing about their nonsensical plight! They have the money. They can always rebuild. Let's not forget that Judeans had plotted to assassinate her in Konigsberg by the Social Democrats!"

"That assassination was done by a group of unknown assailants that had nothing to do with Herimann or Erbel. Unknown suspects who happened to be Judeans. It was not a coincidence! Stop perpetuating that myth!"

"Then she has done nothing wrong to warrant being exiled to Yugoslavia."

"She assisted a putsch of a sister republic! Why, in Daneland, she flirted with the fascists there! And it is not exile, it is a voluntary departure from future participation in politics."

"That is what exile is!"

"No, it isn't! You're enabling her."

"Enabling her? We had agreed to make her part of our new government!"

"Circumstances had changed. It would be a disgrace to my morals and my party to allow her to participate."

"How democratic of you to prevent her representation." Rudensdorf fumed.

"She is dangerous." Berning retorted. "And was that an attempt at humor?"

"She is necessary."

"She is a criminal."

"She is a hero."

"Can I please interrupt?" The new Minister of Finance, Heimal Schlage, attempted to diffuse the bickering. "I understand that we all held high expectations of the November election but can we please move past Degurechaff and focus on the present?"

"There will be no further cooperation as long as the Argent Silver is absent." Rudensdorf bellowed, blowing massive smoke rings into the air. "That was the deal and it will not change."

"Herr President," Schlage implored the former dictator. "Please! Be reasonable."

"Reasonable? REASONABLE?" He roared, "I gave you my time, my money, and my integrity to promote your stupid loans as agreed upon yet you could not fulfill your end of the bargain! By all rights, I should cash in my government bonds and get my Reichmarks back…"

"Let's not resort to that…" Schlage chuckled nervously.

"Herr President." Chancellor Berning spoke up once more after taking a few deep breaths to calm himself down. "What will it take for us to stand united?"

"Degurechaff must return." He answered.

"Will you grant her a pardon if she does?"

"The way I see it, she had committed no crimes against Germania or its people. The November Boycott was a natural response to the insidious plot that took place in Konigsberg."

"It is a crime!" Berning screamed.

"How ironic. When a liberal is doing a boycott, he is protesting but when a conservative is doing a boycott, it is oppression." Rudensdorf grumbled.

"This - this…stop making yourself the victim here! You're the tyrant here!"

"Tyrant? I have passed no oppressive laws here."

"It's because neither of us can get any legislation done…not without a coalition! We are losing the mandate at this very moment."

"And that is a problem we'll take to our graves." The President puffed his cigar.

"And you are content letting this Republic burn to the ground just because you don't have that blonde bitch by your side?" The Chancellor fumed.

"Just as you are content letting this Republic fall into ruin because you can't stand the sight of one little girl."

Elena was smiling.

It sent a shiver up my spine.

Her optimism and growing radiance reminded me too much of Viktoriya considering how deep in the mud Freikorp Degurechaff is with the Republic. Too much goodwill has been torn to shreds between my unit and the Progressive Bloc; only by continuing to be the bulwark against the revolutionaries would they tolerate the legality of my paramilitary organization. I can only hope Weiss sticks to the agenda during my trip to the South.

"My dear leader…" she sang, "I know you have a train to catch but I wanted to bring awareness to the reorganization of the Freikorps. I have a proposal that might be of interest to you…"

"Could you wait until I return?" I huffed. She just had to bring this up now…

"This is rather important. It's about Konigsberg…"

"What about it?"

"I believe it would be extremely valuable if you bring a small group of bodyguards to deter any further assailants."

"Really?" I smirked.

I must admit…I am intrigued.

"Not to underestimate your strength, Argent Silver, but having to fight every thug and petty criminal constantly would surely be exhausting. You won't be able to perform the important tasks! Bodyguards will serve as deterrence and show your enemies that you are not vulnerable." She bowed before pulling out a small pamphlet.

"Say I agree, what do you propose we call this subunit in the Freikorps?" I inquired before freezing in place what I saw on the paper.

"Protection Squadron." Elena answered.

The SS.

"Absolutely not."

I brushed past her, shoving the paper back into her hands; it sent the brunette spiraling into a panic flurry.

"But-but…why? It's dangerous to be unaccompanied considering the growing violence."

"I don't disagree with your reasons. It's the name that disturbs me."

"Why?" she inquired, "What's wrong with the name? It is perfectly mundane and ordinary."

I stopped in my tracks and sucked in a deep breath. This must be like going back in time to 1941 to tell the Emperor of the atomic bombs America would drop on Japan in 1945. Elena simply could not comprehend how those two letters would inspire terror in Europe and the world at large. It would be useless trying to explain it to her when I only know the bare minimum.

"Yes…that's…the problem." I turn around to speak to her. "It is…mundane. I expected something more…creative from you."

"Creative?" Elena repeated, her eyebrow raised in skepticism. "What do you mean?"

"Anything. Just not 'Protection Squadron.'"

"I see…" she nodded slowly. "So would you consent to the formation of the bodyguard unit if given a different name?"

I simply stared at her, wondering how much of this was already preplanned. Quite frankly, bodyguards would be extremely helpful in my situation. I can't bring Freikorps members everywhere I go, especially when it is needed here in Germania. However, I am in no rush to have it formed immediately considering I could rely on Lergen's contacts and allies in

Yugoslavia for protection. In addition, having bodyguards would ruin my ability to go incognito whenever the need arises. It is rather beneficial that whenever the public sees a celebrity outside, they automatically assume it's a lookalike.

"I do." I spelled it out for her, "But considering my status, I prefer it would be comprised of mages first. Weiss must lead this bodyguard unit and oversee its training. If not Weiss then, Konig, or Neumann would do."

I should not forget about Lergen's warning about Elena, especially when she frowned ever so slightly. Either of the three men should be sufficient enough to keep her in check.

"And Elena?"

"Yes, commander?"

"When I get back, there are a couple of things we must address together…"

"Of course, I will eagerly await your return."

"And, there is also a favor I would like to ask you," I said softly. "There is a problem with Alan Foerster I would like you to take care of."

Upon hearing his name, Muller offered a razor thin smile before pulling out a small journal to write down in. Her eagerness had given me a brief pause. I shouldn't indulge her and yet, despite my desire to give Foerster an earful of the violence he propagated, the damage is already done. There is no point in trying to lecture a shrapnel bomb. All I could do was to clean up the mess.

"Tell him that I am disappointed and furious that he broke his promise to me - I don't care how you say it, just tell him - and afterward, deal with Foerster however you see fit. But nothing more."

"Consider it done, commander."

With my funding cut off, I could no longer afford the luxuries of travel and although I acquired a small war chest due to my service to Magyarozag and Daneland, I still needed to be frugal in these dark times. It was another wound to my pride though I was too tired and bitter to curse Being X for this misfortune. Everything was going so well…why did it all have to fall apart?

December will be depressing this year. Again. If what Lergen told me was true, children in Central Europe had not experienced a happy Christmas since birth. At least the people were quick to move on with their lives though, instead of grumbling about Judeans, the public grumbled about the Progressives breaking their main electoral promise: removing my face from

the new government. Progress achieved, I suppose? It was a small vindication for me that everyone else seemed to agree that I was the mascot and main incentive in buying into the Progressive Coalition.

Other than a few odd looks directed at me by a dozen beggars, veterans from the Great War, and a few youths and their parents, my presence was undisturbed during my time at the train station. The ticket agent, however, with a young boyish face with hair as gold as wheat and eyes as blue as the sea, looked at me with discerning eyes when I purchased a seat in third class. What I expected was a spot in a more humble location near the rear of the train but instead, I was given a first-class ticket.

A first-class ticket to Beograd with a special stop at Wien.

I was slightly confused but before I could speak up, he merely offered a coyish smile.

"It is the finest car in the company. I hope you will find its services nothing short of luxurious…Argent Silver." He whispered, "Just don't tell my boss. He is a filthy Socialist."

"How do you know I am not an imposter?" I inquired.

"Your clothing is too drab, your walk is too rigid and the Argent Silver is the only living recipient to receive the Silver Wings Assault Medal." He answered playfully. He pointed at my chest where the medal was pinned. "You should take better care of it, you don't want anyone to assume it is fake, assuming they are stupid enough to think it is fake."

"Who are you?" I narrowed my eyes at the ticket master.

"Just a humble nationalist…I served in the Imperial Army too, Argent Silver. Germania For All..." he quietly remarked before adopting a straight face. "NEXT!"

I left the young man to wait at the platform, making sure I stood well away from the edge, while I subconsciously twirled my war medal between my fingers. Again, odd stares and hushed voices surrounded me, and although I tried my hardest to ignore them, I could not drown out their words. How nice would it be to have headphones blasting music into my ears right now…

My mind eventually drifted back to Viktoriya, wondering what she was doing now. I hope she has already begun the process of making amends, giving up these delusions of hers, and finding peace in her life.

You always look for the best in everyone and everything.

Pilsud would be laughing his ass off right now if it weren't for the fact that he also had to deal with the paranoia of the November Boycott spreading into Pullska currently, just like how it is spreading into the other post-Imperial states like wildfire or the Black Plague.

Magyarozag called for aid and it was you, not the Francois, who arrived.

I can see why your face is on every poster in every city.

I love you…I would do anything for you.

You have my sword, my loyalty, and my life.

That is a mistake, Degurechaff. Who is protecting you?

GO. HOME.

Thankfully, the train arrived in time to prevent my thoughts from clouding my mind. The train conductor gave me the odd stink eye before breaking into a shallow smile and directing me to an empty train car as if I had reserved the entire area for myself. It was just me, my thoughts, and the various servants at my every beck and call.

During the journey, I dined like the Emperor, surrounded by the richest food and the most delicate wine and ciders, but I never felt so poor. It was a funny feeling since this is exactly why I joined the Imperial Military in the first place: to get out of destitution and live surrounded by comfort and plentitude. This was but a small taste of that dream though I never imagined it to be so lonely.

Even the coffee, despite having the finest beans, grew to have a bland taste in my mouth.

"What is so special about this place?" Visha asked with mild annoyance, trailing behind Father Adelheid like a lost puppy. Although her arm healed nicely thanks to his treatment, her head was still wrapped in a bandage. A testament to her strength and dedication to bashing her brain out against another brick wall. Self-flagellation in the true Russy manner.

He brought her along to join him on a pilgrimage and she initially envisioned a lengthy trip to Rome or whatever city the Lutherians considered holy. Visha had not expected a random sanctuary in a random area of Berun. Its aged statues and engravings indicated its Papalist affiliation though the area surrounding it could use a lumberjack.

"It's the orphanage." The technocratic theologian turned to smile brightly at the veteran.

"The?"

"This is where Tanya von Degurechaff came from. This is where it all started."

Bewilderment struck her like an artillery barrage as the brunette looked at the orphanage with newfound respect and awe. It was a really silly feeling. Visha felt like a bumbling older sister to Tanya ever since she laid eyes on the preteen and witnessed her age into a beautiful young woman. To think of Degurechaff as small as a baby, it was more believable that she was sent directly from Heaven like an angel considering the knowledge and wisdom that came out of her mouth than be one of the countless poor souls growing up without a parent's love.

Visha's hands drifted from branch to branch as if the trees were just waiting to tell their story watching the little blonde girl waddling about the courtyard or staring into the clouds behind windows. She offered to stay outside, after all, she is from the Orthodox Church and Papalists were heretics. Tolerated heretics but heretics nonetheless in the eyes of the Grand Patriarch.

But Father Adelheid insisted on joining him to meet the Papalist nuns though they weren't enthusiastic about seeing his face.

"We're not supposed to talk to you, Mr. von Schugel." The elderly nun, Sister Margaret, spoke in a foreboding tone. "You've been excommunicated."

"Excommunicated?" The veteran was confused, looking to the old man for an explanation.

"He has been branded a heretic and an apostate." The nun quickly explained.

"Is it because he asked too many questions?" Visha turned to face Sister Margaret.

"It is because I didn't like their answers." Father Adelheid answered, his words unwavering. He glared at the nun with unflinching eyes. "The Church failed to provide clarity for the crisis of our age. I have come here searching for the truth and only the truth. I must know of Saint Tanya von Degurchaff."

Saint Tanya? As in the Patron Saint of the Empire?

Visha enjoyed hearing the title far more than she initially realized.

A war raged between the exile and the nun, staring intensely at each other with silent thoughts thrown at each other. But before long, Sister Margaret conceded and allowed them entry. Even with the sudden revelation, Visha could not understand what secrets this orphanage could hold concerning her hero.

From what the nun told them, Tanya was simply dropped off in a basket at night. No witness. No description of the carrier. Only a small letter bearing the name "Tanya Degurechaff." No matter how fiercely Father Adelheid interrogated the staff, no one could recall anything extraordinary that occurred the night of Tanya's arrival. No miracles. No visions, No indication of divine intervention.

Excavating their drawers and cabinets brought nothing new and Father Adelheid eventually left the building defeated but not discouraged. Visha, however, felt only confusion. What was he looking for? Evidence of Tanya's divinity? As insane as she was, even the White Russy knew that the Major was no relative to Jesus Christ. Then again, she wouldn't be opposed to the idea.

The old priest and the veteran retreated to a small covenant that served as their haven. The revelation of Father Adelheid's expulsion provided Visha the explanation as to why his church experienced low attendance if it was lucky to gain any attraction at all, save for a few scientists, engineers, and other assorted intellectuals who came to visit Schugel. They preached about numbers, equations, and new fields of science and psychology that she had no hope of ever understanding.

Visha never knew the inner workings of a Papal Church but she was not ignorant of the concept of Christian heresies. Every village in the Russy Empire had one, but it struck her as extremely odd that Father Adelheid was excommunicated.

During the short time she spent with him, she already deduced that he was the anti-Rasputin. He did not preach with fire in his belly or steel in his voice. He did not chase after young women nor seem to indulge in fame or luxuries. Even his unapologetic scorn for atheists and secularists did not seem to inspire his voice to grow as loud as a tiger's roar. While his preaching was a breath of fresh air compared to her usual experience with sermons, Father Adelheid's application of numbers, scientific theory, and physics was depressing and off-putting to hear.

Every miracle, every act of God, every vision of Heaven, Hell, and the very Fate of Humanity were mere natural phenomena to be dissected and analyzed like they were doctors tearing apart a human cadaver in a lab study. The former Development Chief Engineer knew the scripture well, far better than the Orthodox priests she knew of, and spoke in a manner far easier to understand and contemplate even if his heretical manifesto was a Frankenstein's monster of a bible. Instead of hope and joy, his sermons only gave her a greater sense of unworthiness when the mystical elements of God were removed entirely.

Schugel's God is an Engineer.

His God is a Physicist.

His God is a Chemist.

His God is a Biologist.

His God is a Machinist and Craftsman.

His God was as omnipotent and omnipresent as a pencil and a sheet of white paper.

"Why is it so important to know the Major's parents?" Visha inquired, taking a sip of cold water with the priest. She noticed that the kitchen they were in lacked a knife storage block. It was probably for the best he got rid of it. For her sake. "They abandoned her."

"It's not about her parents being alive or not." He answered gruffly, stirring the ice cubes in his cup absentmindedly, as he pondered on a great big book of European names and languages. "It's about what they represent. Meeting either of them would cut the long journey short."

"What do you mean?"

"Her name, Degurechaff, does it sound familiar to you?"

"I don't know anyone else if that's what you're referring to." She answered.

"No. I meant the name itself." Father Adelheid hastily shook his head as he pointed an old but sturdy finger at a page. "Degurechaff… It's Slavic in origin. Tanya von Degurechaff could be a Slav."

That forced the cold water out of Visha's mouth as she nearly choked in disbelief much to the scientist's annoyance.

"No…that can't be right." She spluttered. "That can't be true."

"Why not? Her surname is not linked to traditional Germanic. There is a strong indication of her Slavic roots." Schugel looked at her with curious eyes.

"She is… too smart to be a Slav." The veteran looked downcast at her own words as she spoke aloud. "Too beautiful to be a Slav..."

Tanya von Degurechaff was as Germanian as the River Rhine. Her hair is as blonde as the wheat in Kieva with eyes as blue as the sky itself. Her unparalleled intelligence could not be found in a Slav, only in a Germanian. The polygenism evolutionists deemed it so; and published it in their essays, manuscripts, books, and articles for the last 200 years.

Even the Americans were very interested in this field of study, being its greatest practitioners.

In the natural order of Europe, they stated, the Germanic people were the highest form of man, the pinnacle of knowledge and aesthetics, while the Western Europeans like the Frankish were second rate; Southern Europeans were middling whereas the Slavic people were placed on the lower end of the natural hierarchy. They were ranked higher than the Africans and the Gipsies but lower than the Asians and the Judeans. It was the responsibility and moral obligation of the Germanic race to uplift the ignorant savages into becoming equal inheritors of Europe.

Oh, how Visha was jealous of her Judean classmates for receiving higher praise than her in school - especially when they had to review the latest racial study. That it was a privilege that she was allowed to live in the Empire.

The backwardness of the Russy Tzardom, the lack of modernization in the towns and villages, and the Bolshevik Revolution were declared evidence of racial inferiority and intellectual regression of the Slavic people; untouched by Western Enlightenment since the Mongol Conquest of Eastern Europe. These "race" scientists declared that inbreeding with Asianic hordes prevented the Slavs from achieving equal status among the Germanic race like its Western cousins: the Pullskans and the Bohemians.

Hell, the reign of Katarina the Great demonstrated that it took a Germanian to lead the Russy nation into becoming a great power. That foreign leadership was necessary to bring the Enlightenment to the savage East.

If it was revealed that Tanya von Degurechaff was indeed a Slav, it would turn the European racial hierarchy upon its head. An Easterner leading the Germania…leading the Empire. She would no longer feel embarrassed reading great Russy works such as Tolstoi and Gannibal outside of RNOD circles.

Visha clutched at her head, feeling a new wave of pain and guilt erupting across her brain. She immediately evacuated the room to retreat to her new bedroom, falling back into the routine of sleeping and waking up not to see Tanya's face in the hallways or offices. Even when fog consumed her mind, Visha overhead Father Adelheid muttering short prayers to the Lord, pleading for forgiveness and healing.

Rhiner Neumann began to appreciate the mundanity of party conferences and bureaucratic reorganization. Though he never had a mind for pencil-pushing paperwork, the change of environment away from the Rhinish mud, and the concrete jungle warfare in the cities was like a well-needed vacation. A chance to calm his nerves and indulge in food and spirits. It was a shame he couldn't bring his fiance to the office but then again, combining love and business was seldom successful.

Given his assignment was at the metaphoric crossroads where the Lutzbuergers and Rohrites converge to battle for influence, he spent every day in the last couple of months smashing the skulls of revolutionaries with his fists and the butt of his rifle. It was one thing to kill Francois; it was another to kill a fellow Germanian. But Neumann is nothing but a loyal and dutiful soldier of the Empire. Germanian or not, he killed Communists and National Vanguardists and will continue killing them until the end of time itself if need be.

Killing their children during house raids, however, felt different. Very different. He always had a soft spot for kids, given his aspirations for fatherhood. But it would be folly to ignore the lesson learned in Arene: an enemy you let go of is an enemy that will return. Who's to say they won't

grow up to become future Communists and National Vanguardists to kill him? To kill his future wife and child? Assuming they don't kill each other first. Like it or not, their children and their children's children will take up arms to destroy Germania and its history. It was a frightful thought that he could not humor any longer.

Like the fairy tale stories he read during childhood, the cycle of retribution must end at the family line. Such risks cannot be left to chance; everything has to be accounted for, one way or another.

"Neumann? Helloooo…" Weiss called out to the veteran from across the table, "Are you with us?"

"Have you been drinking recently?" Elena Muller inquired.

"If not, it's time you start doing it again." Konig hummed.

"Do you need to go to the washroom?" Heydryck asked calmly.

"No, no. I'm fine. I just need a beer." Neumann waved his hand, "Just wondering where we go from here now that the Major is gone. We just accomplished so much so recently - among other errands."

"Oh, yes." Heydryck nodded before glancing at Alan Lichten, "We all have accomplished other errands."

It was strange seeing Lichten so melancholic. In the brief time Neumann had met the man, the Judean was the most optimistic man in Central Europe. But reality has a nasty habit of breaking a man down into a small, weeping mess. The veteran took no pleasure in the boycott but Neumann didn't have the intelligence and wisdom of the Major to propose a better reaction to the Konigsberg Plot.

In addition, it was also equally strange not to see Visha present. It seems their inner group was shrinking despite the recent pool of fresh talent that Weiss promoted or brought over.

Like Weiss, Neumann voted for the Germanian Democratic Party, and like Weiss, his disappointment was immeasurable when it was announced that the Major was expelled from Reichstag politics. It was somewhat comforting to see the public reaction was anything but positive. Even Rohr seemed to think of the Major's expulsion as "cowardly" and "dishonest." The only party that seemed to openly support her removal was the Kozis and their treacherous leader. How unsurprising.

"Before we proceed with the main reason I asked you all the come here today," Weiss began, laying out several newspapers and a secret letter signed by Minister Lergen himself. Even

Elena Muller was in grumbling disbelief when she considered the contents. "Heydryck, Lichten, what is the status in the West? How are the Judean militias faring against the Communists?"

Lichten turned his head to glare at the blonde giant who merely nodded in quiet approval before facing the group to speak.

"Bad. It has gone bad." He replied with his thick Magyar accent. "Morale has plummeted. Desertions everywhere. The men and boys want to go home to protect their families in the east - by east I mean here. We were simply outmatched and outgunned. The Cossacks did not help matters; they accused us of treachery several times over. Even attacked us on several occasions."

"He is not exaggerating," Heydryck spoke up, sounding equally exhausted. "We are not dealing with a monolith here. There were Judean conservatives, Judean liberals, Judean progressives, Judean monarchists, Judean communists, and Judean and half-Judeans in Rohr's Stormtroopers for reasons God only knows. It is extremely difficult for me to form a cohesive front to rally our allies behind Degurechaff's banner upon hearing the news of the Konigsberg Incident and seeing the actions of the November Boycott."

"If Argent Silver was in the west with us, it would have been a much simpler affair," Lichten said ruefully. "Yes, we are fighting for our homes, for our families, for our liberty and Germania, but what does that look like? I hate having to kill my brothers and sisters but I cannot let them bring Bolshevik tyranny to the Republic. To me, it seems we stand alone. That we have no true friends."

"You're right…we have not been fair to you." Konig huffed, looking at Lichten with sympathy before glaring harshly at Elena. "We should not confuse future friends with potential enemies. Especially with our fellow countrymen."

"Unfortunately," Weiss announced, "That seems to be the case for everyone here. The Reichstag calls - demands - for Freikorps Degurechaff to be disbanded."

Neumann shook out of his thoughts in an instant, shocked and confused that this was the first bill that the Progressive Bloc sought to pass. Elena was deep in vengeful contemplation, Weiss was as grumpy as a toad in a dried pond, Konig simply stared into space, Heydryck was struck dumbfounded while Lichten fell deeper into despair. The newspapers were passed around and they all spoke of the same reality.

The bill was called the "Law Against Combat Groups" which explicitly sought to formally demobilize the Freikorps that operated in the Republic through methods that banned future funding and equipment being granted to the Freikorps whether or not the sources were foreign or domestic. Any Freikorps, militia, or paramilitary organization that can or has organized armed demonstrations in public space, is suspected of overthrowing the state, or threatened the

territorial integrity of the Republic will be branded illegal and its members punished with prison sentences.

Even if the conservatives and the reactionaries reject this bill, the Progressive Coalition has just enough weight to force it through. But given that the Communist Bloc has recently announced their intentions to throw their full support for this bill, it will surely pass in the Reichstag.

At first glance, the bill would also apply to the Communist Spartakus Front but the Reds will simply spin its activity as union strikes and worker protests. Neumann smirked bitterly. Damnable Kozis and their weasel words…

As for Rohr, given his army of Brownshirts reaching 3 million members or more by New Year's Day, he won't disband. Not at all. Perhaps that's why the Progressives would be willing to grant an exception for the Kozis. Ideologically, there is no distinction between the National Vanguard and the Communist Party except for the topic of Judeo-Capitalism and Rohr's Germanian nationalism and his obsession with putting every Judean in front of a firing squad.

"And the letter from the Minister of Defense?" Heydryck broke the silence.

"Let's see…" Weiss muttered as he opened up the envelope to peer into its contents, "Our friend Lergen has some contacts among the Progressives that revealed to him secret talks between the Coalition and the Communists over our commander - oh…Fuck."

"Fuck?" Konig repeated, looking slightly confused at his friend.

"Fuck." Weiss nodded, before passing the letter off to Elena Muller.

She turned pale as a ghost while her face was contorted in a flurry of emotions while Heydryck moved to grab the paper. He too was quickly struck with utter incredulity. When it was finally Neumann's turn to see, the veteran found himself with a similar expression.

There were a few discussions, and contemplations, of placing an arrest warrant for Tanya von Degurechaff upon her return.

For crimes of treason against the Republic of Germania.

To make matters worse, Lergen's contacts also heard rumors, strong rumors, that she would be extradited to Parisee for war crime tribunals. A peace offering to the victorious Allied Powers as tribute. An act of submission…

"We have to overthrow the Republic!" Neumann found himself standing up from his seat. "We need to overthrow it NOW! Francois soldiers and their politicians will be raping her from prison into an early grave…"

"We can't!" Elena Muller shouted back before Weiss had a chance to reply. "We need Degurechaff present, right here and now, to allow our putsch to be legitimate. Launching it now will only label us as terrorists."

"At the very least, we need to let the public know that the Reichstag is plotting."

"The reputation of the Republic is already at its lowest point." Heydryck pointed out. "It will not get any worse. Any exposure would be a redundancy."

"Forget overthrowing the government, what about the Freikorps?!" Koenig questioned loudly, "What are we to do?"

No more funding. No more armaments. Shipments from the Czech-Slovak State will surely ground to a complete halt by January.

"I don't understand." Lichten mumbled, "Why are they doing this to her? Don't they know she still wants to collaborate with them?"

It makes little sense to Neumann as well. Demobilizing the Freikorps, fascist or not, in the face of Communist or National Vanguard insurrection is a recipe for disaster. It is almost as if the Progressives were trying to destroy their reputation by focusing their efforts on denouncing the Argent Silver instead of these extremists. For the past year, Degurechaff had done nothing but provide valuable aid to strengthen the democratic process and bring legitimacy to the new Republic. She brought unity, progress, and a flicker of hope to the nation when it needed them the most despite her hasty departure to Yugoslavia.

It is almost as if she knew…

That the world will see that the Republic needed Degurechaff more than Degurechaff needed the Republic.

"Yes, it is unfortunate that Freikorps is to be disbanded but I believe I have a solution to our new worries." Elena Muller suggested, glaring sarcastically at Weiss, "If you allow me…"

"Go right ahead," Weiss grumbled.

"We do have a loophole we could exploit…I assume Weiss has already alerted you all about the bodyguard program?"

A round of murmurs and nodding heads indicated it so.

"To maintain our…militant opposition to a Communist or National Vanguardist revolution, we may not have to disband the Freikorps but merely transition it into a different kind of

organization," she explains. "One that could still allow us to acquire funding from our conservative allies: operating as private security and strikebreakers."

"Like the Pinkertons in America?" Lichten inquired.

Elena Muller nodded.

"And what do you propose we call this 'bodyguard' organization?" Heydryck asked.

"Die Kaiserliche Sicherheitsabteilung/KSA."

"The Imperial Security Detachment…" Neumann remarked slowly at first. "I suppose there's no point hiding ourselves now from the Reichstag. We must make sure the Major has the support she needs once she returns."

"You seem hesitant, Weiss." Konig observed, "Is something wrong?"

"It's-it's just that I feel we are going against the Major's wishes once again," Weiss replied.

"What makes you think that?" Elena inquired sharply, "We are still working with the Republic, are we not? Are we not disbanding and pursuing new careers just as the Reichstag prefers? What did the Major say? 'Even if they do not want our help.'"

"She makes a fair point, brother," Neumann grunted. "If what Lergen says is true, then - then I'd say fair is fair. They pretend to protect Degurechaff, we pretend to protect the Republic."

We pretend to obey if she pretends to command.

"Elena Muller?" Weiss approached the brunette when once they were the last ones present in Degurechaff's manse/office. For some reason, he felt the need to be the one to lock the doors just as he had the inkling that she held similar reasons for staying behind. "A moment of your time?"

"Already attempting to woo?" she winked, "Sorry to disappoint but I am a lady with temperamental tastes in my partners. But I appreciate your bravery."

"That is not - uh - what?" The veteran blushed heavily as he considered her response. "Oh. OH…you're…"

"Yes. I'm that kind of woman in this modern age." Muller rolled her eyes, "Sorry for not being the meek little housewife you seek."

"On the contrary, I think you'll be a lovely housewife to another if you put your mind to it."

"I'll take that as a compliment." the brunette's smile though Weiss felt it was more like a frown. "Now care to explain why you chose to remain here staring blankly at files and ledgers relating to my line of work?"

"Finally, a moment of direct transparency. A rare luxury both within and without the Imperial Army." The veteran mage smirked bitterly. "You know, I wish we could finally converse as two honest devotees of Degurechaff and her vision."

"Oh, I share the same sentiment as well." she nodded solemnly, "I too believe we could be more productive together with the understanding that honesty is the best policy."

"Indeed…so why us? Why do you follow Degurechaff? What do you get out of it?"

"If we're to be answering inquiries to measure public opinion, you start first."

Weiss snorted as he quickly looked away; finding the dim streetlamps more appealing than Muller's eyes. They were as dark and rich as Flemish chocolate. Her eyes were both captivating and insidious.

"You are the Major's eyes and ears. Do I really need to say it aloud?"

"If nothing else, it merely confirms what I already know and therefore, saves the paper and time spent for revision."

"I like to think of myself as a simple soldier with simple goals," Weiss explains, looking upwards at the moon. "To serve with honor, to fulfill my duties diligently, and come home safe and sound to live as my father's heir. I curse the Republic every day for making such tenets impossible to adhere to."

"And for revenge, you became a politician." Elena Muller grinned.

"Please, I would prefer none of us be called as such. The Republic already has enough of them. I am a soldier of the Empire, nothing more - nothing less."

"Is that what Degurechaff means to you? A return to normality? A return to the golden era that never existed where simple men can lead simple lives?"

"You say as if it's a terrible thing to look forward to considering the humiliation that surrounds us daily." Weiss shrugged, "I believe that perhaps you have a counterargument to push forward now that I have said my piece. What do you want? Truly?"

"Well, for starters, unlike you and your simple-minded approach to Degurechaff's leadership, I see a chance to completely reinvent the concept of Europe and Europe-ness." Elena Muller

snarked, "It is so strange to see our institutions be compromised with antiquated ideals that have no place in a modern society. The Communists, the Fascists, the National Vanguardists - they all promise a revolutionary approach to life, to government, to the very concept of personhood but they all end up in the same pitfalls that the Progressives and the Liberals experienced then and now: being moral and social hypocrites."

"I suppose that's the one thing we can both agree upon."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. The Empire is dead so let it remain so. Degurechaff will build a new one, a better one, where the revolutionary spirit of 1848 is reignited in the hearts of every man, woman, and child. A torch that is bright, untamed, and uncorrupted by the likes of Bismarck and Metternacht. One Realm for one People, one Culture, and one God under one Sovereign."

"One God?" Weiss couldn't help but feel amused by it, "Says the half-Judean. How is that life working out for you? Worshipping 'two' Gods. I can't say I encountered many Judeans and their stories in the Imperial Army."

"It. Didn't." Elena Muller replied coldly, glaring daggers at the young man quite bitterly. "I was raised a conservative Papalist at my father's behest and…no one in my mother's tribe took kindly to it. But I had the last laugh. Now they don't regard me with open disdain."

"Really? How do they greet you currently?"

"With open fear."

"How many of them did you retire during your previous employment?"

"Define 'them.'"

"Just - you know - everyone?"

"For every 100 marks I processed, only five turned out to be Bolshevik traitors while everyone else was useful idiots but Rudensdorf deemed the ratio acceptable. It was never the question if I sent too many into permanent retirement, it was always if I sent too few." the brunette explains softly.

"And how many did you kill - personally?" Weiss questioned carefully.

"19,737 dead since my reassignment by Rudensdorf and Zettour - it will be 19,738 tonight by midnight. 'Executioner Elena' was my moniker during the dictatorship. I suggest you remember it well, Herr Weiss."

"I am surprised Visha did not notice your new activities earlier."

"Because ignorance, prejudice, and fanaticism guided her every step; a miserable woman from a miserable family. The day the new Empire is formed and rises above such petty squabbles and unites the various people into a single monolith will be the greatest achievement by Kaiserin Degurechaff."

"That's quite the imagination," Weiss muttered, "But I suppose it will be an issue for another day."

"You sound disappointed, almost fearful; are you sure you are not Zettour's son?"

"Please, I try to keep an open mind when it comes to politics and society. I am not an advocate for the full regression like those old Junkers. I quite like some of those liberal ideals."

"How fascinating," Elena nodded coyishly, "Now that we have plenty of work to do, let us build an army worthy of Argent Silver."

Chapter Eighteen: The Doomed and the Determined

Wien. The Cultural Capital of Europe and the Empire. The City of Music, the Arts, and where Dreamers go to Dream. No self-respecting intellectual or visionary can claim fame and recognition without so much as entering a coffee shop here. This was the city of Kingmakers and Kaisers, rising from its humble beginnings at the dawn of the Holy Roman Imperium and the formation of the Osterrian Empire, with their monuments and palaces remaining. A stark contrast of past glories and present misery.

Despite Osterrians taking immense pride in being Imperial and Germanian Romanticists; being stewards of Germanic soil with its mountains, forests, and valleys; and making their region the breeding ground for new thinkers and poets revolutionizing science and philosophy, the November Boycott hit them like a typhoon. You could just sense the years of pent-up rage and despair emitting in Wien a mile away before arrival. The best I could say now is at least the Osterrians learned to clean up after themselves.

Unfortunately, my trip to Beograd was severely delayed as railroad unions were enacting a national strike. It would take days, if not weeks, for the government to reach an impasse with the Communists. Since it was futile to sit and wait, the servants encouraged me to take the time to tour the city and bask in its greatness. 'There is always something to discover in Wien' they said; that many a great man and woman found their calling here.

Upon exiting the train station, I immediately spotted several shops closed down, their windows covered in drapes, despite street traffic having reached its peak for the day. For a world-renowned city that speaks 56 languages, no one will look eye to eye with each other. If anything, everyone present excelled at ignoring what they were seeing in front of their face. Homelessness, unemployment, inflation; all the typical sins of current society were here.

Open shops were either fascist strongholds, communist bastions, or vanguardist castles with very few moderates in between. Judging by the magazines and newspapers on the stands, the Ostnationalist government endorsed the boycott, unlike the Progressives, pushing for its constituents to reject Judeo-Bolshevism, to reject Judeo-Capitalism, and to reject Judeo-Cosmopolitanism. Reading just a few transcripts by Ostnationalist President Endelmann Dollfuss made me wonder if I was trapped in a mental institute; there was nothing coherent in his words and I felt I was losing my mind trying to process his anti-semitic paranoia.

This is what the people of Osterry elected? This is what they wanted? Even the most ardent, brainwashed Communists had government policies more rational than this. Dollfuss openly praised the people of the Legadonian Entente as a model culture, calling their Nordic blood to be evidence of a successful European nation, and proposed policies to protect Osterry's national identity through racial purity. It made me sick to the stomach; I already had my fill of such rhetoric in my past life in Japan.

It disturbed me that a President blamed the multi-ethnic makeup of the Empire to be the primary reason for its defeat; blaming military incompetence and defeats on Magyar treason, Bohemian Slavicness, Pullskan degeneracy, Balkan stupidity, and Judean financial conspiracy. Meaningless crap as always. I decided to skip his thoughts about Konigsberg and threw the newspaper away since I already had an idea of what he was going to say.

Why, oh why did Foerster break his promise? Did he know what was going to happen once he leaked it to the media? I sighed heavily though my worries were not directed towards him; I have no sympathy for what Elena plans to do to him.

The further I walk, the more I see Ostnationalist paramilitaries marching on the streets, occasionally dodging a literal bullet when street fights break out between them and their ideological rivals, while occasionally searching for an inn or hotel to stay at. Preferably one that didn't have clear racial discrimination policies. Suffice it to say, it was nearly all of them, and I sure as hell would not want to be in the same building overflowing with Communists and National Vanguardists. It took an hour of wandering before I turned at a street corner and nearly bumped into a couple mourning the loss of their establishment.

I looked up to see what sort of business it was but their brand was missing some letters. It was as if someone went up a ladder to fix a nonexistent typo with a sledgehammer.

It had been smashed and vandalized during the Osterrian November Boycott, with its owners forced to clean up the mess. Like the other targeted shops, the broken windows were covered with curtains to avoid further humiliation. The wife did her best to smile at my greeting, forcing herself to stay polite when the world itself imposed unrelenting cruelty upon her, while her husband, a man dressed in drab civilian clothing with a toothbrush mustache put on a stoic face upon seeing he saw my war medal. Despite his poker face, fear, sorrow, and anger consumed him internally and there was a small fire in his eyes that seemed to grow even brighter the longer he stared at me.

"I'm sorry this has happened to you." was all I could manage to say.

"If you're looking for a meal," the husband spoke up, "We can still make something for you. The kitchen still works."

"That is…not necessary," I replied though my stomach began to grumble loudly in contention.

"We - we insist." the dark-haired woman nodded quickly, her eyes begging me to say yes. Hoping against hope I would say yes. "It is the least we can do."

"Very well," I bowed, "But I must be allowed to pay for the meal."

"Aye, I can accept that proposition." The man nodded before leading me inside, "I am Heidler, Addie Heidler, and this is my lovely wife, Ruth. Thank you for coming."

Heidler? Why does that name sound so familiar?

I dispersed these paranoiac thoughts and focused on the present. The toothbrush mustache was merely the latest fashion trend among middle-class men after all.

To say the interior was nightmarish would be an understatement. The smell was horrendous and the furniture, stands, and counters were overturned, abused, and set alight by torches. There was a small pile of bricks, broken upon impact on the hard floor, with rude and threatening remarks written all over the pieces. There were scorch marks everywhere, such that it was a miracle that half of the lights still worked and the air wasn't a choking hazard.

Ruth picked up a broom to sweep away the debris and glass shards while Addie lifted a table and chair for me to dine at before he went downstairs to disappear into the kitchen. It was extremely awkward for me to simply sit there in silence and watch the acting waitress tidy up the area around my feet.

"This must have been a lovely restaurant," I said to her, trying to lighten up the mood. "It would have become the main center of attraction in Wien. I know a stranger's words mean little in these circumstances but please know that I would have supported your business endeavors."

The ruined paintings were perhaps the most pitiful sight of them all. I may not have an artist's hand but I do know that despite their crude aesthetic, it had brought joy to someone. I could not imagine the despair that would go through a creator's mind to have his life's work be put to the torch for the crime of promoting "degeneracy."

"How did you meet Heidler" I asked the woman when she arrived at my table to serve me a glass of cold water and milk. God, that name felt so strange leaving my tongue.

"It was at an art gallery." She smiled wistfully, wishing she was transported back into time to relive that moment. "Before the Great War, before Triano…Addy aspired to become a student at the Wien Institute of Art."

"Oh…how nice."

Wien Institute of Art?

Heidler…

"We were always struggling before but now…we'll have to close the care down for good." Ruth started to weep, "Oh God…what is going to happen to us? How are we going to repay my father?"

"Everything is going to be ok." I lied through my teeth in an attempt to console the waitress while her husband called out for her assistance, "Everything will fix itself in due time…"

No, it won't.

It will only get worse.

It will always get worse.

What did Zettour say?

The beginning of the end for them.

It is one thing to have an incompetent democratic government.

It is one thing to have a fractious democratic coalition.

It is another thing entirely to have a democratic republic that openly espouses what it hates.

To have pride and prejudice poison the office of the presidency. To give a platform for extremist movements to openly attack innocent citizens for the crime of mere existence. Sure, the Communists, the National Vanguardists, the Social Democrats, and other militia would be formidable roadblocks to Dollfuss' ambitions, but they're roadblocks nonetheless.

With government institutions on his side, he will be able to enact his vision with open impunity once the opposition has been neutralized. I hope that public resistance will be strong enough to vote Dollfuss out of office in the next election cycle. I can't believe I have to count on the communists to help restore common sense to the country.

The sound of footsteps on the hard surface floor alerted me to my order. It was extremely awkward to be served food by a waitress about to burst into a bawling mess. It didn't help that my meal smelled delicious; a savory crepe filled with a generous amount of sliced meat, vegetables, and spices as well as a side of sausages bathing in steaming sauce. My dessert was another crepe which was essentially a giant slab of melted chocolate decorated with strawberries and coated in whipped cream. It was a lunch fit for a Kaiser yet I scarcely felt the urge to eat considering my surroundings. I could tell I underpaying for my meal but since I was most likely their last customer, the couple had no incentive to be frugal.

Not wanting to make their experience with me any more miserable than it needed to be, I approached the food with renewed enthusiasm and found the taste to be highly luxurious. It certainly brought a small relief to Ruth and looked at me warmly with eyes both calming yet unfamiliar.

"This is a wonderful dish. Truly wonderful." I spoke as honestly as I could to her. Suddenly, I realized the kitchen below had gone silent.

Like a beast rising from the depths, the husband ascended the stairs with slow and heavy steps. At that moment, his face, dripping in sweat yet remaining stern and unflinching, bore an extremely uncanny resemblance to the mad orator of my timeline. It only left me wondering…just wondering…if he is really…

"Has the food exceeded your expectations, Argent Silver?" He asked innocently.

"In more ways than one," I replied solemnly.

Herr Heidler puffed his chest with great pride upon hearing my compliments; his dour attitude was immediately replaced with raw joy as his arm immediately leaned over to hug his wife. So lost in his euphoria of seeing a happy client has made him forget that his business was devastated beyond repair. But just as quickly, Heidler's face grew downcast when confronted with reality again.

The couple left me for my meal to resume clean-up duty, sweeping the floors and removing charred wood from the counters and shelves. The husband picked up a piece of artwork, buried underneath a small pile of rubble, that was spared the worst of the damages. I couldn't help but continue to stare at the man. This has to be a mere coincidence that he happened to be a lookalike to that Tyrant.

So lost in the painting that his wife went over to help anchor him back into reality. Shaking out of his thoughts, Herr Heidler walked over to my table to show me the painting. As it turns out, he made it during his time in service on the Illdoan front, a portrait of the Illdoan Alps with its snow-peaked mountains and deep green slopes.

"They say the River Rhine is hell." Heidler remarked bitterly, "They have not seen Ionzo."

I snorted in reply. I can't blame him. Given the incompetence of the Illdoan military, the Illdoan Front was where all the useless and stupid Imperial generals went. 24 Battles of the Ionzo was enough to make anyone insane; both militaries were performing an action equivalent of a man bashing his skull against a brick wall in an attempt to knock it down.

"When did you serve?" I inquired.

"As soon as the war began, but being my mother's caretaker, I requested to be placed in the reserve." he answered ruefully, "But it wasn't long before I was thrown into that hellhole."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"She was a tough old woman." Heidler continued while his wife moved to embrace him, "She survived cancer thanks to the good doctor and the will of God but alas, she could not survive the Turnip Winters."

"Your father wasn't there to take over?"

"No, he died way before the Great War started so it was up to me to make things right for my family. I guess I am just happy that my parents aren't alive to see me like this…What an awful mess the Francois had inflicted upon us."

"Francois? Wasn't Dollfuss elected?"

"Well, yes." Herr Heidler nodded, "But Osterry had one vote and one man to vote for. Parisee didn't want any Pan-Germanian parties anywhere near the capital so it was either him or the communists. They gave everything Dollfuss needed to win. I wouldn't be surprised to see Francois troops marching down Wien now."

Oh, the lengths the Republic would go to keep the Empire from reuniting. It ruined the flavor of a five-star meal; I barely felt the urge to take another bite. It is bad enough they are enabling a genocidal regime in Dacia, it's even worse that Dollfuss has the impression that he could conduct something similar. So much for the Rights of Man…

"No one realizes the dangers of what is to come," I muttered. "They can't see it."

"They can't or they won't?" Heidler replied rhetorically, "This is different, Argent Silver, very different. I have not heard of a single person who has not followed your career in Germanian politics and read your position on the Judean Question. Once knowledge has been gained, it is impossible to feign ignorance. Argent Silver, everyone knows where you stand and many of them disagree quite severely."

"An understatement of the century."

"So the rumors were true then? Did you get exiled by the Progressive Bloc?" Ruth said, breaking her silence.

"It is not exile - it's - errand work," I explained. "It would be more accurate to call it a demotion."

"You say as if it improves the reputation of the Reichstag…" Heidler scratched at his chin. "As far as everyone is concerned, the Ace of Aces can't get demoted - can't be demoted. Are you sure they're not just trying to get rid of you?"

Get rid of me? The Progressive Bloc did not betray me. None of the men did. I have failed no one in particular; if Herr Schlage had just listened to what I would say - if he had just accepted

Moscic's letter with a grain of salt - I wouldn't be here and the Republic wouldn't be collapsing at the foundations. All because…all because…of Visha.

"I think we conversed long enough about my work. If you please, can I have a moment to finish this - delicious meal you have prepared." I glared at the man.

"Come dear," Ruth grabbed her husband by the army to lead him back down the stairs, "Let's leave her alone…we should probably discuss our future instead of hers."

As the only person left in this ruined wreck of a cafe, I continued my meal in peace as I tried to ignore the sounds of a busy street outside and the rumblings of an argument coming from the kitchen or the occasional gunshot in the distance. What a horrible, horrible mess to be in.

Here I am at the crossroads once again…to stay or to leave. Every minute I tried ignoring the calamity falling around my ears, the more I reached the same conclusion that the November Boycott had far exceeded its original purpose of expressing outrage - even if said outrage was extremely violent - about an assassination attempt on me by Judean gunmen. In Germania, I could at least see the argument, flawed as it is, that it was one last-ditch effort to instill a sense of collective unity towards the Imperial past. To remind the voters what they have lost from the Great War. I was the pride of the Imperial Army after all and militarist culture did not die easily among Germanians.

A type of unity that could only be obtained by identifying a scapegoat, to deflect internal criticism. It's a small wonder why Rudensdorf and Zettour picked the Judeans as culprits behind the Empire's defeat. Both men had every incentive to preserve whatever honor and integrity in the Imperial Armed Forces as if they weren't the ones that led the Great Power into the grave with their unrealistic expectations of me.

It is a shame that in this era, the world still operates under the clause that war is merely a continuation of politics; and that there is no room for pacifists or conscientious objectors. One would think after spending eight years drowning in blood, the world will heal itself and work towards a better future. But no, strip away humanity of its luxuries and all that remains is a deeply bitter and angry populace looking for something or someone to channel their malcontent rage towards destructive purposes. By painting themselves the victims, their demagogues can justify being awful. Awful to themselves and others.

So wrapped up in their misery and a mad desire to lash out in their humiliation that no one seems to stop and consider the implications of what they have done. Yes, there should be anger towards the occupation of Brussels. Yes, there should be anger for the naval blockade. Yes, there should be anger for the numerous injustices that have been inflicted on the people of the Empire. But the Judeans had nothing to do with this. I do not understand why some are so adamant about seeing them as the enemy when empirical evidence has suggested it was the Francois or the Albish behind these atrocities. It's almost as if it was some sick plot of divide and

rule by the Allies to prevent the Empire from reuniting by fermenting and exploiting cultural divides.

The capitalist system was supposed to be a marvel of human prosperity even if it didn't always guarantee the individual would be happy when his pleasures could not become his life's work. Even as I looked around the wreckage, I could almost just see the business succeeding in another life. I could just see Heidler and his wife, the two of them working together to see their cafe rise to new heights, growing to become a star attraction in Wien. A pleasant dream contrasting with the stark reality of drab curtains blocking the sunlight, shadows of people walking by, and piles of glass shards swept to the side as if they were meant to be hidden.

If the furniture could talk, they would be weeping right now. They will have to be tossed into the bin, broken before they were even used and enjoyed, to be condemned as forgotten and unwanted garbage. Even the table I was eating on felt as if it were holding up the weight of the world, the loneliest table in Wien, and it too would have to be disposed of. Its vibrant colors were scratched away by the scars left by the fire. And yet, thinking about Herr Heidler, should I feel wrong pitying the man knowing what he resembled in my past life?

Once I finished my meal, I called out for my check, causing the Heidlers to emerge from the kitchen looking slightly worse for wear. The chef looked as if he was drowning in his thoughts while his wife forced herself to put on another smile. Just as I was paying, the cafe door swung open to reveal half a dozen men armed with machine pistols. Their eyes were cruel, hateful, and directly aimed at me.

The red banner they wore suggested only one thing.

Communists.

Herr Heidler looked ready for a brawl but the company leader simply pointed his gun at him to stand down.

"Don't try anything stupid. We're just here for her." he said initially before looking at me specifically, "So the rumors are true, the Argent Silver did come to Wien. Put your hands up!"

Right now the idea of being accompanied by an entourage of bodyguards was appealing. I should have Elena or Weiss smuggle me a computation orb, even a civilian one. A knife and a fork are not going to do much against a firing squad equipped with automatic weapons and I certainly can't risk the cafe owners being caught in the crossfire. Perhaps I could try bluffing them into disarming?

"Please, I'm just an entertainer!" I gave my best impression of a naive, innocent cosplayer. "I'm…practicing my…acting skills for the cabaret!"

One of the men immediately blushed a deep scarlet while his leader looked at me with great suspicion before giving Herr Heidler the odd stink eye. A sharp glance from me was enough to alert the chef to play along.

"She is from Berun!" he told the communists. "From Walburger Street."

That prompted a very sour and quizzical look from his wife.

"Good Lord, not another one…" the squad leader cursed under his breath before looking down at my chest to spot my medal. "Where did you get that?"

"From a close friend," I answered quickly. Just take the bait already. "She is a good customer designer. We were students in theatre."

"It looks very realistic," he remarked, seemingly unconvinced. "What's her name?"

"Put the guns away and I will tell you."

"What do we do now, Comrade Klein?" One of the gunmen whispered to the commander.

"Can we keep her?" another said.

"I suppose we can still send her to Moskva…" the commander grumbled. "Of all the entertainers, you look just like her the most. I doubt they could tell the difference immediately."

Shit. This is not good. I do not want to be sent into the communist heartland. I immediately glanced over at Heidler and gestured at him, as subtle as I could given my limited body movement, to bring out any firearm he stored to shoot at the communist thugs in the back when they escort me out. I could try to at least stall for time in the vague hope of allowing the police to arrive.

As mad as Dolfuss is, at least we share the commitment of opposing the Reds; his minions will surely come here to distract them long enough for me to escape.

"Can I at least finish paying?" I pleaded with the men, "Are chefs and waitresses not part of the working class?"

That caused the leader to give a devilish smirk. "You're a good liar, I can give you that."

"Good actors make good liars" I smiled back, "It's in the trade."

Just go away already.

But before the communist could make another snappy comment, several sharp cries were heard just on the other side of the curtains as if a mass stabbing had taken place. For a brief moment, I just realized how quiet the streets have become.

"Get on the floor NOW!" I shouted at the married couple before diving underneath a table.

Herr Heidler understood the message enough to grab his wife and take shelter behind the counter. It was not a moment too soon as the cafe was quickly flooded in a hail of bullets. Indiscriminate fire ripped through the curtains and placed a hundred holes all over the walls and communists. The poor fools were like fishes in a barrel with the curtains obstructing their sight of their attackers. It wasn't long before the floor was covered in a small pile of bodies and a large pool of blood.

Poor Ruth looked ready to faint though I kept my eyes locked on the door as I crawled out of my cover. The first person who came through the door was a plain, young, brunette girl dressed in drab clothing as if she were a grocery bagger armed with a machine pistol and a large dagger. Despite the mundane cuteness she exhibited, her face was anything but ordinary.

She had a look of utter contempt toward the corpses as if the communists were worth less than the cockroaches underneath her feet. But upon seeing me, her expression transitioned into a quiet satisfaction before bowing in my direction.

The next person who followed her was an older man still wearing the Imperial uniform with the addition of the Totenkopf painted on his helmet. It was a sharp indicator that he was part of a right-wing Freikorps.

"My compliments to the Executioner." He nodded at the young girl before turning towards me with eyes wide open. "Damn, you really did come to Wien."

"Are you an Ostnationalist Fascist?" I asked him.

"No. I'm a Pan-Germanian Fascist, my lady." he quickly shook his head, "Just because we collaborated with Ostnationalists during the boycott doesn't mean we are close friends. We seek the return of the Empire after all."

"That distinction does not fill me with confidence," I grumbled as the Heidlers slowly emerged from their cover. "I would thank you for your intervention, however, your firing squad nearly killed us in the process."

"My humblest apologies. I was working under the assumption that you had a sixth sense in these sorts of things."

"Oh really? Who told you that idea?"

"She did." He pointed at the young girl with the gun.

"Alfred? Is that you?" Herr Heidler looked at the fascist in open amazement.

"Hi Addy, what are you doing here - oh shit, this is YOUR place. Sorry for making a mess." the Freikorp soldier cringed under his helmet.

"A mess?!" He nearly roared, "You promised that we were to be spared in the boycott!"

"I did! I told my men and my fellow Pan-Germanians to avoid your cafe. It's the Ostnationalists who made the mess of it all. The barbarians that they are…"

"Wait," I looked between the two men, "You know each other?"

Alfred nodded.

"We both served in the Illdoan Front. Addie saved my life when my plane crash-landed after a bad air sortie. He dragged me from the fire and into a nearby hospital. Thank God I could still use my legs. Stopping his cafe from being torched was the least I could do. Though I seem to fail at that part…"

"It's -" the chef stopped himself from bursting a nerve, "It's fine. We were going to have to close down anyway. Dolfuss made it impossible for us to conduct business in this country."

"Don't worry, there's always a place for you in the Imperial People's Fascist Party." The veteran assures.

"But my wife is -"

"Your wife is one of the good ones. I can vouch for the both of you."

One of the good ones? What a strange comment to make.

"Alfred?" I spoke up to grab the man's attention. "Just how strong is the communist movement here?"

"Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, there's a Communist revolution of some kind; and every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, Dollfuss commands his men to shoot the Reds. Of course, we'll help Dollfuss stop the Reds but the only reason some strikes last for more than a day is because the workers hold valuable skills. The employers rather not have them all killed at once."

"Like the railway workers…" I grumbled, "Does the President hold a popular mandate? His speeches left much to be desired."

"Popular mandate?" Alfred chuckled as if I had told a joke. "It was between Dollfuss, the Communists, or the Francois to rule Osterry directly and everyone disliked the last two. Come the next election, I reckon the campaign trail will be even more divided than before. I know my party will want to usurp Wien."

"That's assuming we last long enough for the next election." Addie Heidler fumed, "The man is one step away from declaring himself a dictator like that mad fool in Dacia."

"He probably will." The Freikorps soldier shrugged, "If not tonight, then certainly tomorrow or the week after. I heard he already won the full support of the Judiciary and the Legislation."

How wonderful. A dictator-wannabee corrupts the institutions of a democratic state and uses their functions to silence and intimidate its political opposition into compliance. An aspiring despot relying upon historical prejudices and fermenting new xenophobia to exploit societal fears of decay and alienation in the modern setting. Hate is the only guiding principle in his movement - Hate and Paranoia - and the only reason his brand is successful is because his opposition is too busy tormenting each other.

Where have I heard such a man like this before? I pondered to myself as I glared at Heidler. He looks so much like that great tyrant in my timeline, so much like him.

The angry chef caught my gaze and for a while, we stared at each other. Feeling discomfort, he immediately broke away to tug his wife away for a private conversation.

"Well, I'm going to go talk to the police," Alfred said to no one in particular as he moved to walk out the door. "Hopefully it will be someone sympathetic to our cause. Oh - wait, before I forget, can you get your autograph?"

Our cause? I shook my head in exacerbation when he dumped his helmet in my hands and reached into his pockets for a small paintbrush and a small jar of white paint.

"I knew these would come in handy." he smiled to himself

"If I sign this, will you put an end to whatever prejudices you hold?" I inquired.

"Prejudices? Please, Argent Silver, let's not be so childish -"

I used his helmet to bludgeon his temple like a frying pan, causing him to immediately recoil in pain. He was swearing to high heaven as he clutched furiously at his head.

"Alfred," I spoke to him in a harsher tone, "This is not up for debate. It is a 'yes' or a 'no.' Will you stop perpetuating the Stab-in-the-Back myth that I had worked so hard to discredit?"

"I - I mean…"

"Yes or No, Alfred."

"Yes! I'll do it. I really want your autograph!" He begged.

"Good." I huffed, signing my name using his paintbrush on the back of his helmet. "Now take this news and share it with your cohorts outside and elsewhere, commanding officers included."

"Wait - what?"

"You heard me. I don't care what you do or say but everyone must know these lies need to be laid to rest. Permanently. And if they do not listen, abandon them."

"Abandon?"

"Yes."

"I'll try." he begrudgingly accepted.

I silently watch him exit the door before moving to speak with the armed woman standing quietly at the corner.

"You're one of Elena's girls, are you?"

At my words, she sputtered suddenly. Her stern look immediately gave way to panic, "Please, Commandant, don't say her real name so openly. Secrecy is paramount."

"So is that a yes?"

The young woman fiercely nodded.

"What is the current status of her operations?"

"Suboptimal. With the funding cut, the labour pool had to be momentarily shrunk to save costs. I was deemed useful enough to remain in service." she explained quickly.

"How many more of you are out there?" I inquired.

"Not enough to assist you in full capacity I'm afraid. We would have intercepted the communists tracking you down hours earlier to prevent this kind of confrontation."

"What will be your next task after this?"

"I can't really say -"

"Listen." I gently grabbed her wrist. "If you truly work for Elena, you work for me. There are to be no more secrets withheld from me, understand? I am your real superior and if there is something that is either a detriment or a boon to my cause, I must hear of it. Regardless if Elena authorized it or not."

"I'm sorry, Argent Silver. I understand." she nodded once again.

"Good, now tell me…what conclusion did you draw from your observations of Osterrian politics?"

"That a revolution is coming." She answered forebodingly. "Whether from the far-left or the far-right remains to be seen. Again, our resources remain extremely limited to provide a concrete answer, Argent Silver. I apologize."

"You don't need to express sorrow, just - I - you're dismissed." With a sigh, I let go of her arm and watched her skitter out of the cafe.

I can't blame her for making such a blanket statement. Dollfuss is doing everything he can to alienate everything but his most fervent supporters in the pursuit of forging a new Osterrian national identity, even if it is built around extremely nonsensical ideals. As much as I would like to see that man removed from power before he implements anything extreme, I also rather not let the communists gain the upper hand nor would I want the Pan-Germanian fascists. Where did all the moderates go?

Surely they didn't get murdered already? Perhaps they're in exile in the Francois Republic? However, that would be extremely stupid considering the mutual disdain everyone had for the Victorious Allies; those exiled moderates would be permanently branded as traitors and puppets of Parisee no matter what they say. A label used by their peers and enemies alike till the end of time itself.

"Do you have a place to stay?" Ruth spoke up behind me with her husband in tow. "If not, we can accommodate you."

"What a fascinating proposition," I muttered, sharing a house with that man. "I don't want to burden you unnecessarily. You've seen what kind of dangers I attract."

"We are not as defenseless as you think." Herr Heidler spoke with burning conviction. "And no dares to attack the Argent Silver and lives to tell the tale…"

"I really need to get to Beograd." I told them.

"The strikers won't relent, even in your presence, and you're likely to be shot from the windows if you take a taxi." The chef countered, "President Dollfuss will ground every airplane in the country at gunpoint once he hears that you've bought a ticket. You will be a powerful bargaining chip for him to get the Western Allies to recognize his tyrannical regime."

"Please, we need you here," Ruth begged.

Please, Help Us.

Please, Save Us.

Please, Protect Us.

My eyes went to stare directly at Herr Heidler. What a bizarre situation to be in. It's that damn mustache of his that makes it so unusual to want to agree to stay. Perhaps - just perhaps - I should stay for the moment to keep an eye on him.

"What do you want me to do?" I gave a small smile.

"To do what you do best, Argent Silver." He replied.

"And what do you plan to do?"

"A putsch, Degurechaff, a putsch. I'm going to take down Dollfuss directly."

What?

Somehow, his proposition did not disturb me as it should have yet I cannot help but express caution. If I endorse this course of action, the Progressive Bloc will be correct to condemn me and cast me out like a leper. That my presence will be a threat to democratic government everywhere, forgetting what I have done in Daneland; getting dragged into assisting Pilsud was bad enough. But if I do not, my reputation will surely be tarnished as an enabler or worse, a sympathizer, of radical ethnonationalism in the eyes of many. Listening to the recordings of my Fireside Chats will have to be done with a grain of salt.

What an awful situation to be in.

If I did go with Heidler's plan of a revolution, what horrors would it unleash on the world? Magyarozag, Pullska, and now Osterry…my endorsement will surely cement the fact that coup d'etats are a legitimate, positive method of changing the direction of bureaucracy. Republics, new and old, would face a very real danger of finding Caesars and Napoleons leading a violent mob of disgruntled voters storming Parliament to set up a more "effective" regime. Any

grievance, no matter how petty or ill-conceived, that is not addressed in a matter deemed satisfactory, will eventually be a catalyst for a violent overthrow of the state.

And yet…

Do I trust Herr Heidler's words that he would save Osterrian Democracy? Do I want to trust him? Granted, the thought of saving democracy filled me with a sense of joy and pride that I could not explain. Removing that idiot Dollfuss from power would give me the odd satisfaction I had not felt since killing Mary Sioux.

As much as I do not want to set the awful precedent of coups, I definitely don't want President Dollfuss to set precedents either. Has there been not enough suffering already? Instead of digging old wounds, why can't we move forward together and build a common future?

"Herr Heidler," I said to him while I accompanied the couple to their place of residence, "I must warn you: if you do this, there is no going back. The abyss will swallow you."

The man gave a brief pause when he turned to look at me with uncompromising eyes. "Argent Silver, look around you. Is it any worse than what is happening to us right now?"

"No." I muttered, "I suppose not."

Well then, so be it. Above all else, Dollfuss and his ilk must go.

Our journey took us to the Judean quarter in Wien but Herr Heidler said that the label was a misnomer. Yes, this side of the capital was home to many Judeans but it had grown during the Imperial era to include every ethnic minority from all four corners of the Empire. Bohemians, Croats, Magyars, Bosniaks, everyone who lived in and fought for the Empire, was found here. There were even Illodoans, White Russites, and a few Asian expatriates operating noodle stands. Cosmopolitan in action with the various smells, sights, and sounds working in harmony to produce something grand.

Of course, since this is Dollfuss' Osterry, this area looked as if it was dragged through hell even though the residents spent their entire day still cleaning up the bullet holes and shattered glass. The Freikorps that stood as guards wore armbands and helmets depicting the Red-Yellow-Gold, the colors of the Germanian Republic and no doubt a strong indicator of the Pan-Germanian sentiment that resided in the Judean Quarter. I can't blame them for romanticizing the Empire; I too would have supported the Empire of Japan if the State of Japan failed every promise imaginable in uplifting its citizens to a higher standard of living.

Once again, I saw my face on the walls in the form of reused Imperial propaganda pieces. I had expected the men who pasted these images would have updated the words to suit the current

times but I suspect that no one could spare the funds to do that. I can't imagine anyone wanting to invest in a nation so desperately trying to tear itself apart.

Other than a few odd looks from the civilians and sentries who saw my face, the path to their house was clear and undisturbed. From what Ruth has told me, they had a small guest room where I could stay for the time being. I offered to pay rent for the duration of my stay but she quickly refused. Helping her husband on this dangerous mission was more than enough payment as it was.

With a huff, I followed Ruth with my luggage in my hands while we walked up the stairs to the guest room while Herr Heidler disappeared into his personal study to make a phone call. Unlike the rest of their humble abode, my new room was completely barren save for a bed, some sheets, and bright baby-blue walls; a stark contrast to the flower wallpaper in the living room.

"Does my husband scare you?" Ruth asked me while I laid my suitcase on the bed. "I couldn't help but notice that you looked intimidated. Was the food not to your liking?"

Hmph. Scared? The tyrant of Germany does not scare me; he is but one dead man. No, I am not scared of him.

"Whatever do you mean?" I smiled at her, "Your husband is full of surprises, that is all. He is a good artist but a better chef. I didn't think he had it in him to take such drastic action. I was expressing pity that the Republic has been corrupted so soon by irrational actors."

Ruth bit her lip as if she was suppressing some hidden worry before a knock on the front door startled her.

"Strange," she said, turning around to walk downstairs. "We're not expecting visitors…"

"I'll get it, honey!" Herr Heidler shouted, racing out of his officer with a handgun. "Looks like the Reds want a second round!"

Part of me contemplated hiding in the closet or the drawers but at the same time, I rather not see Ruth become a widow so soon after meeting her. I simply closed my suitcase and quickly searched the room for anything that could resemble a weapon. Perhaps a walking stick would do?

"So Addie, you're one of Dollfuss' henchmen now?!" came a sharp, raspy voice bellowing from below.

"Sorry, Father." I heard the chef mumbling an apology. "You caught us off guard."

"Likewise," the old man grumbled like a thunderstorm before suddenly adopting a softer tone. "I nearly had a heart attack when I heard what happened this afternoon. I just need to know -"

"I'm here, Father," Ruth said, her footsteps quicked to embrace her parent. "We're safe…We're safe."

"Good. Good." he mumbled, "That's what I want to hear. Thank God you're safe. First, Dollfuss, now the communists…we can't stay here any longer. We must leave. We're not safe here any longer…"

"And go where, father?" she asked him, "Who will accept us?"

"The Americas. The Unified States should be safe enough to live. We can stay in the Francois Republic if possible."

"That won't be necessary." Herr Heidler remarked, "I already have a solution."

"Solution? Are you going to bake Dollfuss a chocolate pie and bribe him into resigning?!"

"No, I have something even better."

"What then? Who -"

Three pairs of eyes were on me when they heard my footsteps and all voices ceased at once. Herr Heidler regarded me with absolute adoration, Ruth looked at me with sorrowful hope while the old man turned as pale and white as his long, thin beard. He would have collapsed on the floor if it weren't for his daughter and son-in-law helping him into the nearby sofa. The elder was completely stuck dumbfounded as he continued to stare in my general direction, even as the Heidlers immediately departed to retrieve tea and coffee.

Grief. Joy. Panic. I saw a whole slew of emotions emerging and disappearing from his face as he regarded me with aging eyes. I extended my arm to greet him but he merely grabbed it with his callous hands, feeling my palms as if he wanted to know I was not an illusion.

"It's not you the Reds are after, it's me," I explained to him. "I suspect someone in Germania realized that I was moving south and notified their comrades here to intercept."

The elder was completely lost for words even as the wedded couple returned with a pot of tea and coffee. With a sign, I turned to Herr Heidler.

"Who did you call?"

"Everyone: old friends and alike," he answered with finality. "There will be a meeting tomorrow night, a party conference to be exact, and don't worry, we won't be disturbed."

"How can you be so sure?" I told him.

"With the communists in an uproar, he'll have his hands full putting them down in the meantime."

How fortunate for us, how inconvenient for him. Our conversation soon drifted to more mundane topics as Herr Heidler grumbled ideas on how he would pay back his father-in-law's loans and how his political party, the Ostzentrum, was split between Pan-Germanians and Ostnationalists while Ruth gave me a short overview of her family history. Her family was Bohemian Judeans, living in Prag for nearly six centuries, before her grandparents immigrated to Wien for better work opportunities after Imperial Unification. For all the flaws of the Empire, labor discrimination was not one of them. Just like the military needed more bodies in the trenches, the need for skilled hands would only continue to expand as industries consolidate and become increasingly specialized in the global economy.

It is easy to assume that political rights and economic freedom are separate concepts, and in a way, they are. Separate but invariably linked. What is the point of opening a business when the state could just march in anytime to charge exorbitant taxes without any input from the owner? What is the point of having freedom of movement when the person can't exchange his labor for money? There's a reason why many Samurai were so eager to embrace modernization from the Western Powers.

Perhaps this was Dollfuss' plan all along. The Konigsberg Incident and the November Boycott were the perfect excuse to enable his agenda of disenfranchisement and creeping authoritarianism. Sabotaging the economic enterprises of his rivals before passing laws to stifle recovery. Without capital to fuel political activism, his rivals would be helpless and forced to watch him move to consolidate the three branches of government around his party and ideology to further alienate the "undesirables." New discriminatory laws will be enacted to clamp down on whatever remaining freedoms the people have by limiting where they can work, live, and travel. With so many barriers to entry, Dollfuss could finally enact the final stage of his national purification to bring forth a new Osterrian identity: extermination or expulsion.

If Alfred's words were correct, there is not much time left before everyone will be suffocated in a vice. Tyrants mostly kill out of revenge, greed, or power. But this is different, very different.

The sun was setting outside when I was done articulating my thoughts and predictions to the Heidlers and suffice it to say, Ruth broke down in tears again. Her father moved to comfort her while Herr Heidler regarded my words with quiet disbelief.

"Do you - do you actually believe that Dollfuss would engage in - in extermination?" He asked skeptically, almost scared to say the word aloud. "Despite everything he has done, the man is still a lawyer and experienced bureaucrat. Surely, even he knows that there are some things he just can't do."

"Do you want to wait long enough to find out for yourself? Look at what is happening in Dacia." I shot back at him. "The man has broken the social contract by searching for fictional enemies

rather than fighting real ones. Disregarding the Empire is one thing, betraying its legacy is another. He is desecrating centuries of laws and cooperation the people of the Empire have forged through blood and iron."

Why would I lie about this?

With no one else wanting to argue, Ruth's father got out of his seat, bid Me and Heidlers farewell, and left the house with a thundercloud following him. Ruth decided to retire early to bed, her face contorted in pure distraught, and quite frankly, I don't blame her. It would be much easier to hear my words and assume that I became a nihilist doomsday prophet, that tomorrow will prove to be a better day than before.

Feeling exhausted myself, I opted to go to bed early as well. Herr Heidler escorted me upstairs but made a quick detour to retrieve something from his study which was fine by me since it gave me personal time in the washroom to clean my face and brush my teeth. The chef met me in the guest room again with a large, hastily crafted book.

"If it's not too much to ask," he began, pointing to the front cover, "Can I have your autograph? Can you sign here?"

"Mein Acht Jahre des Kampf." I read the title aloud, "What's this? Your political manifesto?"

It is him. It really is him. I'm spending a night sharing the roof of one of history's most maddening tyrants. And yet, after everything I saw, he isn't.

"My war diary. Everything from the start of the war, in Illdoa to Norden." He answered honestly, "I was thinking of publishing it to get a minor alternative source of income to help my restaurant business. The idea was recommended to me by a good friend."

"Why didn't you?"

"I tried but thanks to Ostnationalist interference, no one was willing to do it. I managed to arrange a deal with Otho Francois but his publishing company got vandalized during the boycott so there's that."

"How unfortunate," I mumbled, grabbing a pen to sign the title page. "What were you doing in Norden?"

"Garrison duty. My regiment was badly mauled again at the 17th Battle of the Ionzo River so the high command transferred us north to the occupied Legadonian territories to rest and reorganize."

"How did you like it?"

"Awful. Somehow, policing the locals there was even worse than the trenches. All the women there were poisoners." Heidler grumbled, seemingly lost in his memories. "Even today, I can't fathom why Dollfuss looks to them as the ideal pure-blooded race. I've met Croats, Serbs, and Magyars who had more honor and valor than any of those bastards. Even Imperial Illdoans were better comrades."

I rolled my eyes in reply when I handed his draft back. Another small wonder why Daneland wanted nothing to do with the Legadonian Entente.

"Well, there will be a big day ahead of us." I coughed to snap Heidler out of his daydreaming, "I suggest we get all the rest we need to plot a putsch against the government."

"Wait," he spoke up almost immediately, "Can I ask just one more question?"

"Ask away. I can't stop you from saying it in your head."

"How do you know?"

"Know what?"

"Everything." Heidler said, "Everything."

Oh, Heidler. If only you knew the truth. If only you knew what your alternative self was. I couldn't help but sneer at the thought.

"You would not believe me if I told you," I answered.

"You have not deceived us thus far." he countered, "I'm all ears."

"It's simple really: I've been cursed by God and condemned to be his toy."

The whole Great War started because of me. He was willing to condemn the entire world into pointless bloodshed to ensure that I would be a slave in his grand schemes.

I didn't ask to be the chosen one. I didn't ask to be the show pony in the war effort. I didn't ask to be placed in this position. I did not wish to be born here nor did I wish to be born as a girl! I joined the military to escape the poverty that God has condemned me to suffer. And what did God do in response?

He has reduced mankind to animals to torment me. He turned my peers into pathetic morons! He corrupted the elders into cowardly demagogues! Where did all of Humanity's progress go? Did God destroy that too? All because he fears that there will be a day when the world will move on without him. A day that his image and his temples be swept into the dustbin of history.

There is no need for the existence of a Devil when God has placed all these burdens and tribulations before me. The experience wouldn't have been so terrible if my allies and partners had not failed me so spectacularly!

"Condemned?" He raised an eyebrow, "To have the full attention of God upon you, most would consider that a blessing. For you to be under his glory and divine protection…that is very lucky indeed."

"No, it is not." I shook my head. "You don't understand."

"Perhaps I never will. Perhaps you are indeed cursed by God. Doesn't change the fact that the person I see before me is someone very extraordinary."

"That's the hilarious part. I don't feel extraordinary. Quite the opposite in fact, I feel like I should have spent the extra Reichsmarks to buy a plane ticket to Beograd directly."

"Still banned from using a computation orb?" Heidler huffed, "Here I thought they had bent the rules to accommodate your skillset. A true shame."

"I don't blame them for sticking to Triano's terms. Besides, Germania was not being invaded nor was the internal threats dangerous enough to warrant it." I replied. "Though, it would be nice if I did have a computation orb, even if it was civilian."

"I think that could be arranged."

"Don't push your luck too much, Herr Heidler. Once Dollfuss sees a violent mob outside Parliament, he'll have to stand down."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then no one will miss him once he is gone. His brain will be a useful donation to psychologists everywhere."

Author's Note: Finally reached the 100k word milestone. Thank you all for your support for this fic. This has been a very inspiring journey for me.

Chapter Nineteen: My Mirror, My Sword, My Shield

Organising a conspiracy to overthrow the government was easy: it was merely a matter of setting up the time and location of the initial meeting to recruit potential agents. The real difficulty in this instance was the matter of leadership.

While the idea of a putsch is not exclusive to Herr Heidler, as I would gladly overthrow President Dollfuss in any other situation, I still have preferred a straight trip to Beograd undisturbed by Osterrian politics. While I am no stranger to the importance of political pageantry, tying my reputation with coup d'etats filled me with a gnawing dread that clawed at my mind and heart like a cancerous disease. I don't want the institutions of the military and the civilian government to be indistinguishable from each other; the atomic bombings remain fresh in Japanese memories, and I certainly don't want any upstart general thinking he can do a better job than the Brass or the President.

I may not always agree with their decisions but good soldiers must learn to trust the judgement and foresight of their commanding officers regardless of their personal feelings just as said officers must learn to lead without doubt, with eyes unclouded by delusions and falsehoods.

Nor do I want mob rule in Osterry. Laws, barriers, regulations; we need them all to have a functional, stable society safe for democracy. Without them, we live among the animals and survive just as long.

But to have Herr Heidler as the main conspirator leader? It would certainly prevent Chancellor Berning and Herr Schlage from thinking the worst of me. At best, they can regard me as a whisperer, a corrupter if they grow to truly hate me, rather than an unsubtle force of oblivion. Herr Heidler…is not a politician by any stretch of the imagination. He'll make a half-decent mayor of a town or village or even a city council representative if he puts his mind to it but his politics is guided by a sort of naive optimism as if he were still a child reading fairy tales and not an adult male who endured man-made hell for nearly a decade.

He is a chef and a soldier. An amateur artist to boot. A baker who wants to make his cake and eat it too. To the men who mastered the art of Imperial politics, before and after Trianofication, Herr Heidler has no credentials save his ass except for my association and dare I say, my growing amicability. Other than the friends he made during his tenure in military service, he is marching forward to enact a 'revolution' with no real allies; lost in direction and purpose once Dollfuss has been removed. Osterry would eat itself in the chaos.

And then there's the question of leadership in the provisional government that would set up new elections in Osterry. Obviously, my candidacy would be all but assured. However, my affairs must remain in Germania nor shall I neglect my original mission to regain the Progressive's goodwill in Yugoslavia. This then leads back to Herr Heidler, if he is going to be the face of the revolution, then it is only natural for him to assume the role. A daunting task however temporary yet, it was refreshing to encounter someone who truly understood his limits. He knows his flaws,

he knows his ignorance, and yet he seemed to be determined to take on this calamity with nothing but naked idealism and blind trust in God.

Again, naive.

"Do you really think your prayers will be answered?" I asked of him, perhaps with more fire in words than I had liked. "Do you really want his aid?"

We sat in a moderately sized beer hall that had cleaned up quite nicely since the boycott as the owners were Southern Illdoans who immigrated to the Empire. The married couple that owned the establishment had every reason to dislike the increasingly authoritarian regime and thus, took little convincing to operate as our collaborators. Ironically, they sided with the Empire over their country of origin due to better political freedoms, more economic mobility, and better labour compensation.

"Why not? We are his children, after all. He is our Holy Father." he replied.

"A neglectful father is what he is. An abusive one at that."

Herr Heidler regarded me with bewildered eyes.

"How can you say that? Weren't you raised by nuns? Mankind's evil is our own. You saw his miracles. You carried his sword into battle. You prayed in his name."

"It did not mean I enjoyed it. Yes, I did pray. Yes, I did fight for the Fatherland. I didn't just pray for victory. I prayed for peace. I prayed for rationality. I prayed that the brass and Kaiser would realise how fast we were approaching hell."

"You believed God was cruel for extending the war?" He inquired softly.

"Yes," I answered. "What god regards his creations with envious eyes? He saw our progress, our achievements, he saw all the monuments we have built and grew sour and ever more despondent. God has long since neglected to use his power to better our lives so we, as humans, did it ourselves."

"God was… jealous? That can't be."

"Herr Heidler, how does a man keep power over another?"

"By making him suffer?" He said slowly, unsure of his answer.

"Exactly. You know the scripture." I continued, "So how does God keep power over Man?"

"By - by making Man suffer. Argent Silver…I - I don't think I like where this conversation is going. We are his children, He loves us, and he wants us to live free and happy lives."

Free? What is freedom to an entity of infinite power and authority? What is happiness to a being that finds our joy to be inadequate? I laughed softly at his response though he did not share the sentiment.

"Pardon me for asking, but are you still a godly woman?" He whispered. "Are you not his champion?"

"You should know that not all of God's holy warriors volunteered for the job, some were merely coerced into the role." I reminded him.

"Like yourself?

"Yes. I refused then and I would refuse now if given another encounter with him."

"Wait…YOU met GOD?" he stood up straighter in his seat.

Me and my big mouth. I should not have said anything at all…

"Yes." I huffed, as sarcastically as I could be, "He…came to me in a vision at the moment of my death and wanted me to serve him as…his champion. He gave me a miracle to prove that he was serious."

"Wow." Heidler stared at me with a gaping mouth, "I didn't realise you were so…vulnerable at the start. To meet him as a young baby too! No wonder you're bitter about it; you didn't know what you signed up for."

I rolled my eyes at his newfound sympathy, the last thing I ever wanted from him right now. "That can be said for all of us."

We did not have to wait long before our first guest emerged through the fronts. Though he was initially cautious, peering into the beer hall with a tinge of fear, his mood quickly turned to joy when he spotted Heidler. He practically skipped into the room like a schoolboy despite his thin, lean body and gaunt face indicating a period of starvation during the Great War. Though his eyes were haunting to look at as if I was peering into the eyes of Dr. Schugel, his hilariously thick eyebrows were impossible to ignore. It was like seeing two fat, fuzzy caterpillars resting on someone's face; if he didn't get him trimmed soon enough, it would grow to become a unibrow.

"You mad bastard." the young man embraced Heidler in a tight bear hug. "You're actually doing it! We're going to die but hell, you're actually serious!"

"We?" Heidler smirked, "So you're in?"

"Of course, I'm in! Fuck Dollfuss and his Francis backers! Sorry for taking so long, I went out to remind our battalion about this reunion."

"Oh, that's good!" Heidler soon turned over to face me. "Allow me the honor and privilege to introduce Tanya von Degurechaff, the Argent Silver, who has come to Osterry to aid us. Argent, this is my dear friend Richard Hessen-Buhler. We fought together in Illdoa."

"Already cheating on your wife?" Hessen-Buhler looked confused as he looked in my direction. "How much did he pay you for your silence?"

"Huh-what? No. NO!" Heidler turned red in cheeks, the colour of strawberries. "It's her, Richard! It's really HER!"

I directed Hessen-Buhler to look at my medal, the White Winged Grand Iron Cross, and his jaws dropped to the floor. His eyes grew as large as dinner plates as he looked at me once more, from the golden locks on my head to my polished shoes below, and the longer he looked at me, the more intense and unnerving it was to stare at his smile. Immediately he dropped down to one knee, leaned forward, and kissed my hand with such repeated intensity that chills were sent up my spine like a dozen crawling centipedes. I was seriously contemplating gouging his eyes out if it weren't for Heidler pulling his friend away from me as if he were a drug addict.

"Jesus Christ, Richard, this is why you need to start dating a girl that doesn't have blonde hair and blue eyes. Get yourself a Bohemian lady for once. Or a Magyar." Heidler chastised his friend and got him to sit at a nearby table. "Sorry about my friend; he is an avid reader of your exploits."

"It is alright," I replied through gritted teeth before turning away glare at the beer hall entrance once more. I really hope Hessen-Buhler was not the type of man to have loose lips, I rather not have to deal with another shootout. To pass the time, I regrettably had to make small talk with Heidler's friend.

From what Heidler told me, Hessen-Buhler was from Aegyptus, being born thereafter his family moved to the Albish colony to set up their trading company. Of course, the family business ceased to exist during the Great War when Albion clamped down hard on Imperial-owned businesses operating in their empire.

"Did you enjoy your time living under Albish rule?" I inquired, genuinely curious about his perspective.

Hessen-Buhler simply stared blankly at his mug of beer, growing increasingly silent at my question, before telling me his answer. "I did. It was great."

"What was it like-"

"I don't think I'll miss that life very much. The blockade made me realise that the Empire, Greater Germania, is my real home."

"I understand." I held my tongue. I don't like getting interrupted but it was my fault for not waiting long enough to see he was finished. "Welcome home then."

His smile was unnerving; too much it reminded me of Visha and Elena whenever they saw me.

The first guests to arrive next were Heidler's brothers-in-arms of the 421st Infantry Battalion, soldiers and officers alike who all greeted him as if he won the lottery. If Heidler wasn't already liked by his peers before, they certainly will do so now that he has allowed them to finally talk to me face to face and drink with me. Of course, I drank sparingly so as not to lose my wits in a drunken stupor; often requesting milk or cold water from the bartender instead.

For a group of combat veterans being told the chance of getting involved to potentially, violently, overthrow the government, they were merely interested in war stories, which I appreciated, and my personal love life, which I did not. I understand how Imperial propaganda tends to lightly embellish, as my accomplishments were already unprecedented and thus, unrealistic; but I realised how little my exploits were mythologized by the common soldier. When it comes to my tales of heroism, the men acted as if they were shepherds at night who witnessed one of God's angels descending from Heaven to greet them but when they inquired about Visha and her 'closeness' towards me as my second-in-command, their mood turned quite lecherous. I may not have forgiven her yet for arranging the November Boycott but I still took offence towards their crude remarks.

The next lot were representatives from the Social Democrat Workers Party of Osterry, the offshoot of the SPD, led by chairman Karmann Rend. The elderly, white-bearded politician was initially off-put by the sheer presence of armed veterans and swore that must have gotten the wrong address. Rend and his entourage would have disappeared onto the streets if it weren't for me jumping from my seat and making my presence immediately known to him. Given his personal connections with Erbel and Herimann, he has every right to be wary of me, as unfair as it was personally, but nonetheless, Rend had an open mind to hear me out first.

While he preferred to be in a leadership position in this grass-roots movement, he recognized that Social Democrats are still the most hated politicians and activists in Central Europe, save for Communists themselves, and content being the operators behind the curtain. He was initially intimidated by the prospects of the Provisional Government given my influence among the populace but when I explained my plans to get back to Germania, Rend's expression grew a lot more amicable, and offered to speak to the Progressive Bloc on my behalf. A pleasant surprise I graciously accepted; with his backing, my 'redemption' will grow ever closer.

After the SDAPO, came the Centrist Party of Osterry, the Ostzentrum; Herr Heidler's party, led by Chairman Walder Miklann. From what Heidler had explained previously, Miklann confirmed that the Centrist Party was fractured between Ostnationalists and Pan-Germanians; those Ostnationalists moved to join Dollfuss's coalition, becoming one of his core supporters in passing increasingly discriminatory laws targeting minorities in Osterry. Unlike Rend, Chairman Miklann was rather portly; with a thin moustache on a round face onto a slightly rounder body that did nothing to dispel the rumours that he used his political position to hoard valuable rations while the rest of Osterry starved.

"Well Addy," Miklann grunted as he saw the first of his political rivals sitting in their own corner in the beer hall, "You really outdone yourself…not only have you found the Ace of Aces, you managed to get Rend to show his face in public again."

Heidler looked unusually pleased with himself; I wonder what he did in Ostzentrum before meeting me.

"I'm sure Chancellor Berning has plenty of words to say when he was describing me to you." I waved Heidler away and guided Miklann to an empty side of the beer hall, well out of earshot. I should get these conversations concluded as soon as possible.

"Oh, like you wouldn't believe…" the chairman grumbled though his mouth curled into a wicked grin.

"What did he say?"

"That you're a Napoleon with breasts - his description was more vulgar, mind - a Fascist sympathiser, and a suspected deviant."

"Deviant? The only woman I have been remotely intimate with is Viktoriya, my former associate," I explained coldly. "I removed her from my life."

"I had suspected," Miklann repeated. "A schemer, a manipulator, a sophist, a war criminal…"

"Seriously? Has he forgotten all I have done for him and his coalition? The Fireside Chats? The negotiations with the conservatives to reach an agreement over war debts? And my efforts to dispel violent conspiracies? Not even my hired services to assist Daneland and Magyraozag?"

"Frau Degurechaff, you need to understand that when it comes to politics, people have ridiculously short-term memories. At least, they act like they have short-term memory."

"I'm trying to help them…" I gritted my teeth.

"And I believe you." He held up his hands in protest. "Just that your past participation is oddly mixed. Politicians, including generals, don't like mixed loyalties; I can speak from experience."

"Can you clear up the bad air between me and Berning?" I requested.

"You expect me to convince that ass to reconsider his previous opinions?" He regarded me with humorous eyes, "Wish me luck!"

Perhaps Berning was right to assume the worst of me. War heroes make terrific idols to unsavory ideologues. Not to say the representatives of the right-wing Greater Germanic People's Party were the same as the fascist dumbasses that Heidler's Freikorps friend was a part of, but they were pretty darn close. Deeply conservative, traditionalists, and representing the interests of the Imperial aristocrats, they were by far the smallest contingent that joined our conspiracy.

Like the Ostzentrum, a large portion of this Pan-Germanian party shifted over to Dollfuss's regime but not out of naked racism, far from it, as the tyrant was making a better attempt to appeal to populist sentiment than these elitists.

The chairman reminded me of Herr Goering if Goering genuinely lacked any sort of natural charm. The only thing impressive about Walder Rimer is his majestic beard and moustache; I declined him the superficial honour of kissing my hand and immediately directed him and his small party to an empty table to sulk at. No doubt Rimer was just the spokesperson; a puppet to the Osterrian barons, officers, and junkers, sent here to feel me out and share his reports with his masters. I really wonder though if his connections were confined in Osterry.

I'd rather have Zettour stay in Germania and out of my affairs.

By the time the sun had fully set and the dark, starry night washed over us like a blanket, the once quiet, desolate beer hall was filled with laughter and joy. Who knew that such violent rivalries could be smoothed over with a pint of cold beer and hot, buttered garlic bread?

Of course, not everyone had the same level of good humour as Rend and Rimer spent more time trading jabs and barbs than contemplating the future of Osterry. These are grown men, one of which has a body count to his name, demeaning each other as if they were petulant, motherless children. Then again, if this is how they are every time they meet, it would explain how Dollfuss managed to centralise his authority and how the boycott was not thwarted when its sentiment was brought over.

We were joined by other like-minded independents who had one grievance or many with the status quo, who all lost, or nearly lost, something or someone, in the boycott. Heidler and a few others were concerned about spies lurking within the beer hall but given he was the one who made the phone calls, there wasn't much I could do for background checks. Besides, I'm not too

opposed to Dollfuss hearing about us. Let him know that a reckoning will come if he does not stop his current ambitions.

Unfortunately, that satisfactory thought gave way to Visha's face, much to my irksome, but I could not dispel it. Should I hold her accountable for the November Boycott spreading into post-Imperial states like an infectious disease? If so, how much? On the other hand, should I hold Zhabotinski accountable for Visha's actions? If he had verified his intelligence instead of jumping to conclusions, the boycott, my expulsions, and being here in Osterry, none of it would have happened. I would not have to send Visha away.

If Zhabotinski had not been so brash into attacking the first suspected enemy he came across; if my followers and allies had not orchestrated the boycott in retaliation, would I still have uncovered Visha's hidden prejudices? Everyone has a bias, that is true, and I applaud her still for putting the needs of the movement before her own desires but I cannot feel anything else besides a gnawing unease. To think that she held such violent and unsavoury views behind a soft smile, loving eyes, gentle hands, and an ever-studious work ethic.

To think that she was among people who would have chosen to spend the rest of their days doing nothing but work, eat, and raise a family. But if allowed to act out their worst desires; to avenge every slight, every insult, whether real or imagined, against a metaphorical enemy by a power-hunger demagogue…

The feeling of oppression, the feeling of being a victim, are very different than being oppressed and made into victims. For a modern society that has seen the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, we are regressing to the rule of appetite rather than progressing toward rationality. They could have had everything. They could have ruled the world but they could not rule themselves.

I sighed heavily.

If none of this happened. If there was no Konigsberg. If there was no November Boycott. If I didn't have to go south.

Would I still discover the darkness residing inside Visha's heart?

Would I still send her away or keep her by my side?

Would she keep it a secret if I had asked her?

Would she tell me the truth if she knew what my response would be?

"You're being awfully melancholic tonight. It feels more like a party than a conspiracy here." Heidler shook me out of my thoughts when he sat across from me at my small booth. He slid me

a plate of buttered garlic toast and a glass of cold water. "My friend Alfred has been delayed but he will come shortly. If not, feel free to roast him if you meet him again."

"Herr Heidler…" I began slowly, taking small nibbles as I ignored his small joke. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Ask away. You are always welcome to ask."

"Is there anything about Ruth that you wish to change?"

Herr Heidler blinked a few times. His chewing reduced to a snail's crawl through his eyes were no less brighter.

"Why? What brought this on?"

"Just answer it. Please."

"Nothing." He smirked. "There's nothing I would change. If anything, I would change myself."

"Why?" I questioned. Surely it can't be that simple. "How can you say that?"

"My father was a terrific bookkeeper, the best of the best in the Imperial civil service, but he was a flawed man. Numbers he understood. Numbers he can work with. But people? He either takes it or he leaves it. As you can imagine, he was a stern husband and a harsher father. He tore up my silly drawings back then."

"And yet you still loved him."

"Indeed, it was not until death caught up to him did my father truly regretted everything. He spent his last days learning how to paint from me. I'd rather have him die in love than in shame." Heidler grinned. "I must admit that in my worst moments, I acted more like my father than I would have liked towards Ruth. The current times make it much harder to control myself."

"Is that what you would do?" I asked him. "You wish to change yourself? To what exactly? Back to the good old days?"

"Not really. Because back then, that was before I met Ruth. Believe me, I was very naive and reckless in my youth."

"No one is perfect, Heidler. Surely there is something you would change about her."

"Right, Ruth isn't perfect but she doesn't need to be. I married Ruth, not a marble statue carved by the greatest artist in Ancient Hellas. Besides, she can change herself just as well"

"You speak as if it is a straightforward affair. Such transformations can never be that simple."

"Of course it is." Herr Heidler smiled graciously. "To change is to love. I'm not overthrowing Dollfuss because I hate him - I mean, I do hate him but that's not my primary reason - I'm doing this because I don't want to lose Ruth. Dollfuss can condemn my art, my business, and my family for all I care. I will not let him condemn Ruth. You said it yourself…that he wants her gone. I won't stand for that."

"I see," I muttered harshly under my breath. "I can't believe I am taking relationship advice from Hitler…"

"Who?" the moustached chef perked up, looking ready to delve into gossip.

"Nothing. It's nothing."

"A secret admirer? Who is he?"

"She." I corrected him. To hell with it. I'm already staying in his house. What is one more piece of insanity to partake in? "She says she loves me but…"

"But?" He regarded me with earnest eyes.

"She…shamed me. She held dark secrets from me. And I sent her away."

"Then she shouldn't be a problem anymore, right?"

"I can't stop thinking about her and what she did," I told him.

"Oh. OH!" His smile turned into a slight frown. "Don't worry, I won't judge. Sounds like you should get back to her."

"She is the one that created this mess in the first place. She is the one who gave the idea of the November Boycott."

The chef looked down at his plate before aimlessly swirling his mug. "Why did she do it?"

"She says she loves me."

"Love?"

"Exactly. Her love of me and her hatred of everyone else."

"Then all the more reason to go back to her."

"And ignore everything she has done to me? To you?"

"That's not what I'm saying." Heidler shook his head.

"Then what is it? How can you be so forgiving?" I could not believe my ears.

"Degurechaff…it seems to me that if you don't tell her what she needs to hear, then she will find someone who will tell her what she wants to hear."

"Heidler, she is the instigator for the November Boycott. She had set Germania alight."

"And I am overthrowing a democratically elected president; blood will be spilled." He whispered harshly, "The things we do for love!"

Before I could retort, we both realised that the beer hall was reduced to hush tones at the arrival of the next set of co-conspirators. I looked over and saw Alfred and he had brought his friends to join us. Judging by their faces, they were equally displeased to see us. One portly man with a pencil moustache, most likely the leader of Alfred's fascist party, looked ready to explode in fury when he locked eyes with Chairman Rend.

"If this is a joke," the man angrily huffed, "Then this is surely done in poor taste."

"Likewise, my good sir." I got out of my seat to meet him on the floor, causing heads to turn in my direction. "If you choose to stay loyal to the government, then please, leave and speak no more of it."

"Who the hell are you, harlot?" he spat, "Just because you have her sapphire eyes and golden locks does not mean you are Argent Silver. You may have these fucks fooled by your bewitching charm, but -"

"Commander Pabble," Alfred immediately shook his superior's shoulder, "That is HER. It is actually Argent Silver."

"Oh wonderful, you manage to pull the wool over his eyes too." Pabble brushed away his hand, "Who the fuck think you are, girl?"

"Someone who spent eight years of her childhood killing men," I replied coldly, briefly flashing my war medal. "Someone who became an adult killing men."

"What a fancy pin. "He sneered, "Where did you get that? Theatre school? I admit you dress better than most. Perhaps I'll play the fool and be deceived to honour your efforts."

Only he was the one laughing at his poor joke while everyone else looked on with worry and amusement. At that moment, Alfred looked rather embarrassed.

"The Kaiser himself gifted this fancy pin. For defending his subjects and his soldiers in Norden. Sit and partake in our activities, I will gladly indulge in the details."

Thankfully, my words finally breached through that thick skull of his when Pabble's sly grin slowly disappeared from his face.

"What gave you the right to demand me to sit?" He demanded, not yet willing to concede.

"I defeated the Legadonian Entente, twice in Norden skies, to protect our countrymen when they had ten times my number. I had led the vanguard in the Rhineland to liberate the Fatherland from the Francois, drove them back from Imperial borders, and planted the Kaiser's banner in Parisee. I killed every mage the Albish and the Americans have sent my way and smashed the Red Army in Pullska and Preussia. I fought for the freedom and self-determination of our Magyar brothers against the Dacians. Tell me, Commander Pabble, if you are indeed worthy of rank, what have you done to serve the Empire and thus, refuse me?"

I have every right to demand anything from you.

He evaded my question with a tail between his legs and led his followers to an empty table, silent as a grave, while Alfred, to his credit, moved over to talk to Heidler. When Pabble made the mistake of challenging my gaze, I glared right back at him and he immediately found the hospitality of the Illdoans to be more appealing to look at.

With that affair done, I walked back to where Heidler was to alert him that it was time.

"Do you have your speech ready?" I inquired of him.

"Speech? Do you mean the note cards I brought?" He showed me only one and it contained a single line of thought.

"No. I mean an actual speech."

"Uh no?"

"Why the hell not?"

"I didn't have the time."

"You had 24 hours."

"Easy for you to say! I'm not a gifted orator like you. But don't worry, I know what to say."

I rubbed my temple in pure anguish. This cannot be the man who will lead a revolution to overthrow a tyrant. I was about to strangle the chef but he left his seat before I had a chance to wrap my hands around his neck.

"Rivals and associates, friends and allies, alike." Heidler began, taking the stage usually reserved for musicians. "All of you present received my phone calls but from those who received the news from word of mouth: this is not a farce. This is a real conspiracy; we are gathered here tonight for the express purpose of stopping President Dollfuss once and for all. Disunity may stop us from overthrowing the Fascist monster but inaction will. Call me a doomsayer but I have been revealed the truth that Dollfuss' ambitions will not end at the boycott. He intends to destroy us all. Physically. He intends to wipe the slate clean."

A round of murmurs erupted from the crowd; some were already jeering, many more in quiet disbelief.

"My fellow countrymen, I ask you all to set aside your ideologies and work together for a common cause. The same cause that once united the Empire; a dream of a future where any man, woman, and child is free from fear and hunger. To dream like Hellas and to build like Rome. To rise above the naysayers and achieve the impossible. We are brothers, not just in blood, but by honour, tradition, and faith in God."

Oh wonderful, I shook my head in exacerbation; does he really think that flowery words and shallow dreams will overthrow a government? He is talking to adults, not infants drinking yet weaned from their mother's milk.

"Dollfuss is a criminal without question. He sowed self-hatred among the people, brought discourse to society, and built a regime upon lies and hate. He forgets, and he wants us to forget, that Germania, the Empire, is a land of poets and thinkers; our history is forged through the fires of war and industry. More than just a nation of iron and blood, we created Art! We have seen the folly of mankind and sought to rise above the dirt and reach Heaven itself."

Ironically, it was Chairman Rend who clapped first, forcing his followers to follow suit. Miklas looked unimpressed in comparison.

"Let the Albish hold dominion over the seas! Let the Francois hold dominion over the earth! Our place is among the stars! We are the heirs of Weissenburg and Roswitha! The heirs of Goethe and Schiller! The heirs of Mozart and Chopin! The blood of Charlemagne flows through us! Menzi! Markus! Neuburg! Schinkel! A hundred more names I can say! It is no coincidence our great history is filled with such great men and women! In all our history, we sought the truth, we sought to uncover the unknown and venture forth into strange new worlds. We looked to the stars for answers but Dollfuss made us return to the dirt and live among the worms. Is that to be our fate? To become nothing but shattered glass to be swept up and thrown away? To become

something that we are not? I ask you all, politicians and soldiers alike, since when did we grow to tolerate things we find naturally intolerable?"

Finally, some results from his demagoguery. Now the crowd was starting to buy into his pretty words. Does he have all of that written in his notes? His handwriting must be impressive to fit on something so small and compact.

"Is this the future we want to bring our children into? To be surrounded by hate and misery? To be dominated by cold machinery and iron hearts? By God, the Empire was strong back then! We were there when it was united. We were there when we saw the fruits of our labour. When citizenship and duty mattered more than blood and name. When laws and men were made of true steel and not of flimsy copper! Dollfuss said that the Empire is dead. That the dream of Rome is dead! That Charlemagne's heirs have failed!"

Now Heidler was sweating like a pig. It was almost amusing to see him prattle on and on. But seriously, where is the steel behind his velvet words? No one will follow us on speeches alone.

"I'd say NO! Dollfuss is wrong! The Dragon Lives and it Roars! The Empire is not yet dead! We are not yet defeated! Greater Germania Above All!"

I was already panicking when the entire beer hall erupted into loud cheers and chanting. By God, if Heidler had a handlebar moustache, I would rip it off. This was not the plan. The scope was limited only to putting an end to the autocratic rule of the Fatherland Front; bringing back the Empire was not it! Why can't anyone just move on from it? The Ostnationalist project could work if led by someone saner than Dollfuss. Why? Just why? How can they not move on from this?

Heidler's eyes wandered from one person to the next before eventually meeting my frustrated gaze. I held it long enough to force him to shuffle uneasily on the stage. Artists and their silly visions to accomplish the impossible. He made the right decision to step down from the stage and allow me to take his place.

Unlike Heidler, I chose not to fill the audience's heads with smoke; I brought back down to the earth to get the various interest groups to recognize that that was against us. Dollfuss was undesirable as a leader but to wait long enough for the communists to overthrow would spell a different sort of disaster. Unity is paramount, now more than ever, to avoid being forced to pick a lesser evil.

I moved on to the topic of the November Boycott in Osterry and while I was expecting the Pan-Germanian Fascists to get up and leave the beer hall, they chose to stay and listen as I went over all I had witnessed in the aftermath of mass hysteria. I spoke of Heidler and his restaurant, or what remains of it, and when I spoke of Ruth and her family, Commander Pabble was oddly silent, perhaps reflective?

If that's the case, progress is achieved; once he starts thinking about how flawed his line of thinking must have been, Pabble would have to turn around.

"Chairman Rend," I turned to speak towards the elder party member, "You and the Social Democrats have made the unenviable position to negotiate peace with the Western Allies in Triano. A decision that saw the Empire humiliated, dismembered, and its people scattered and destitute. You have dishonoured the Kaiser, brought shame to the Imperial Armed Forces, and saved us all from calamity. You have done the impossible and brought peace back to Europe.

The people of Germania may condemn you all for it but I do not. I am fully aware of how difficult the decision may have been but it had to be done. Perhaps in time, future generations will look back and recognize that you have done a great service to the people of the Empire, even if the party had paid the ultimate price.

It was not folly to wish for peace, Chairman Rend. Nor was it folly to be among those to sign the Treaty of Triano. What was foul play was when you expected the Western Allies to be anything but benevolent in their intentions. Look at what happened in Magyars and tell me who came to their aid when they called for help. Look at the Danes and tell me who defended their borders during the Danish Strait Crisis."

Not to let Rend be the only one left hanging on the meathook, I turned over to glare at Ostzentrum leader who shivered in his seat almost immediately.

"Chairman Miklann, don't delude yourself for a second that you and your party are above the competition; falsely thinking that our rivals would be content leaving us to squabble in the ashes. Even you can see the tyranny of the Western Allies and the Russy Federation casting a dark shadow over Europe. Not even the Pope will save us no matter how many letters you write to him."

That forced the representative to stand up from his seat in protest though I didn't give him a chance to speak.

"Yes, you heard me right, Miklann. Where was the Pope when the Empire was unjustly attacked by the Francois Republic and the Legadonian Entente? Where were his honeyed words when the Empire was starving and Brussels was put to the torch? Where were his decrees of excommunications when tens of thousands of our countrymen were murdered and enslaved by the Francois? The last time I checked, Pius XI was unarmed, unarmored, and surrounded by Illdoan guns during the Great War. When you look at his face, do you see a saviour?

The Pope did not see us worthy of his attention then and he certainly is not going to come to our aid now. Recognizing him as just another political actor with fallible interests will be the best thing you can ever do for your party, more than winning the federal election."

With a sigh, I turned my head to look over at the men who made up the Greater Germanic People's Party. Despite their deeply conservative values, they did not seem offended at all that I had taken the stage. Their joyful mirth turned to ash when I pointed out their obsolete ideology. If there was one good that this war has brought upon the world, it is that it finally brought an end to antiquated social norms and introduced new political and social freedoms to the masses.

Technology has outpaced culture and the war broke the illusion that the world would continue as it was for the next 100 years. It's a new world that these conservatives must learn to accept and adapt to. They would have an easier time drinking wine from a shattered glass than to convince a newly-minted office lady who gained her paycheck and personal bank account to get back into the kitchen. That is until these conservatives gain the power to suppress female suffrage.

Sensing a trend, Pabble's smile was wiped off his face when his eyes met mine and saw that it was finally his turn to be dragged over burning coal.

"It is known, Commandant Pabble, that the Imperial Army has no shortage of cowards, idiots, and other troublesome glory hounds that remained cowards, idiots, and glory hounds - no amount of bullets and bandages could ever cure them of their flaws. Contrary to popular belief, war does not discriminate between the virtuous and the flawed. The soldiers who clung to honour and principle died just as needlessly as those who abandoned them. I saw the end of both types of soldiers.

But do you know, Herr Pabble, what I saw to be the most damnable outcome of the war? That men like you, the ones who survived, instead of returning to the civilian workforce like normal people are clinging to superstition and slander. Is it really possible that so many people can be so gullible for so long? Despite all of the evidence presented that demonstrates your delusions to be false, you and your men have clung to these ideas as there is even a hint of truth within them.

When will you grow and become an adult? Do you not realise how lucky you really are to have lived through eight years of war? As a child, you were given tin toys and cartoons, I was handed a rifle and a bayonet and told to kill for my country. I killed young men, I killed brave men, I killed the strong and the foolhardy. You are neither of those, Pabble."

"How Dare You!" The fascist leader growled from his seat. He stood up and slammed his fist on the table in defiance. "Argent Silver or not, I will not let my sacrifices be made a mockery. I had given my blood, sweat, and tears for the Empire!"

"Indeed you have. If only you had given the same courtesy to others," I told him. "And what a valorous soldier of the Empire you are. Being brave enough to burn down synagogues, harass innocent Judeans, and daring to declare yourself the victim - that takes true courage."

"WHY YOU -" he turned red as a tomato.

"Herr Pabble, have you ever considered the possibility you have been played for a fool by snake oil salesmen masquerading as scientists and scholars? Have you ever had thoughts about your goals and movement that put everything into question? I think not, after all…it is far easier to lie to a man than it is to convince him that he is being lied to."

That stunned him in place as he struggled to force an answer to come through.

"You wanted to protect the Fatherland, that I understand and know all too well." I continued. "But there is only one right way to do it: by protecting the Fatherland together. I am telling you this now, Herr Pabble, if you see me as a false, idiot girl who has no idea what she is talking about, then go. Go home to your fantasies and madness and never show your face near me again.

But if you seek the truth, if you truly wish to liberate your countrymen from the real enemies of the Empire, then stay with me and listen."

I looked over the audience in the beer hall once more. "That goes for all of you! Heed Heidler's words. Know what is at stake if we do not unite in the face of tyranny. At the end of it all, we are all that is left to bring true peace, and true prosperity, to Osterry. I ask you all to leave behind the worries and grievances you have against each other and work towards a common good. For everyone's sake."

Though the whole establishment erupted in applause, the conclusion did not fill me with joy. At that moment, I could only think back to what could be happening back in Germania. Was I right to trust Weiss to take charge of the Freikorps? Was he enough to reign in the excess left by Visha and control Elena? I merely stared and watched as Herr Heidler took the stage once again to begin another speech, one that I cared not to listen to for the time being as I merely returned to my seat.

Perhaps I'm being too harsh on Weiss. He is an accomplished man, my star pupil, and rarely has he disappointed me thus far. Rarely.

Days became weeks, weeks became months, and all the while, Dollfuss and his loyalists have become increasingly emboldened and erratic. To his credit, by attacking the communists and putting down their petty revolts and strikes, he hoped that he would earn enough good with the moderates and the industrialists, to garner the reputation as the lesser of two evils. Unfortunately for him, the people of Osterry already had one: Addie Heidler.

I fought to hold back the bile in my throat just by thinking that. But as reality dictates, this is an alternate world and this is an alternate man. A man who dreams of raising a daughter. The hospitality and kindness of the Heidlers were too generous to mistake their intentions and desires. Ruth doted over me as if I was six years old all over again while her husband spent an increasing amount of time being a rabble-rouser.

Whether in public squares or beer halls, Herr Heidler drew in crowds like flies to honey preaching against the illusion of choice, the people being falsely forced into deciding between the communists and the fascists, and organising protests march to build up momentum. I had to hand it to him, he learns fast. What began as crowds numbering in a few dozen ended up growing as large as a few thousand. A size that Dollfuss responded with assassination attempts and a few death squads.

Suffice it to say that the assassins nor the death squads could not prevail against an angry mob armed with broken beer bottles and loose bricks. Every attempt was a scandal that quickly shattered what little remains of an illusion that Dollfuss had tried so carefully to cultivate. To further accelerate his downfall, the country, like all the other post-Imperial states, has recently experienced a sharp economic downturn no thanks to the tariff war between America and the European nations. Public outrage can only grow from there. Even news from Germania was damning; my Freikorps had been disbanded but street violence only continued to accelerate.

Some of Heidler's allies floated the idea of allying with the Osterrian communists to form a united anti-fascist front though I quickly murdered that idea in the crib. I made it clear to Heidler and to his company of key allies that once Dollfuss has been removed, the communists are next on the executioner bloc. This coup is not meant to trade one extremist ideology for another. The Moskva puppets are just as equally dangerous and no less destructive than the fascists in Wien.

If there were to be such an alliance, the Osterrian communists must approach Heidler, not the other way around, for the relationship within this coalition to be as defined as day and night. That these Reds either moderate their platform to hold more capitalist, democratic virtues or join Dollfuss in the grave. I have no intention of letting this overthrow be corrupted from within by communist ideologues and thankfully, Heidler seemed to understand my position. And sure enough, it seemed to placate Pabble's anti-communist concerns. His fanaticism to tear down the Reds far exceeded Visha's.

The plan was simple: on May 20th, a massive public demonstration, protected by Judean militias and other like-minded Freikorps, will march onto the Parliament building as well as the Presidential Palace to demand Dollfuss' resignation. To further incentivize a speedy transfer of power, we will move to secure the police stations and foment smaller demonstrations in towns and villages to seize control of the councils there. As for the Osterrian Army, that is where my role comes into play; to either convince them to join us or stand down.

I prefer for them to stay passive; this must be a popular uprising first and foremost to keep the boundaries between civilian unrest and military politicisation well-defined - no more military coups.

I had used Alfred to send feelers on my behalf to reach out to any of the officers and generals willing to have an audience with me but there was no guarantee I would return to the Heidlers in one piece. But given my reputation, there was no shortage of Osterrian officers wanting to bask

in my presence; I had the great luxury of meeting Field Marshal Lieutenant Jansa Johann von Theoneau, one of the senior commanders in the army.

But I was marching into the lion's den and I can only hope I made a good first impression on him just enough to keep the tanks and armoured cars from blocking Heidler's putsch.

As for my personal protection, Rend and Miklann offered to smuggle a computation orb for me. Alfred has suggested acquiring a civilian grade on my behalf but I had refused them all. Show too much force and the Field Marshal would immediately consider resistance to preserve himself. A conflict he would lose for sure, but keeping the damage to the minimum was my greatest priority. A civil war in Osterry, even if it lasted for a day, would do irreparable damage to my reputation as a peacemaker and war hero among the wider public.

Ruth and Heidler had a spat over my appearance; she preferred I wore a long, flowing dress to lower Theoneau's guard and make him more susceptible to my "natural" charm. She ripped out an old Imperial wartime poster that depicted my face from the closest to prove her point. I remember that photo op all too well…being dressed up like someone's doll and surrounded by roses. Heidler, meanwhile, insisted I wore a uniform of my Freikorps, preferably the new, updated version. I asked him if he was drunk because I didn't possess such a thing; as far as I knew, my uniform was the Reichsbanner Black-Red-Gold. He then showed me a package "delivered" by Hugo Boss and explained that it was "transported" by a young woman to their house. No doubt it was another of Elena's agents if not the same one I had met at the ruined cafe.

The husband and wife argued pretty fiercely last night; don't they realise I am an adult? I killed grown men with bullets and bayonets before my 10th birthday. In an effort not to be a catalyst for a divorce, I made a compromise that satisfied no one: I wore the clean white dress that Ruth wanted before wearing the black Freikorps Degurechaff coat over it. It even came with a rank I was unfamiliar with. My war medal, however, was placed on the dress instead of the jacket. Instead of normal heels, I opted to wear the jackboots that came with the Hugo Boss package. As for the yellow armband that depicted the Black Dragon of the Empire, I decided to forgo it. I don't want to give Theoneau the wrong impression.

So here I was, at the Field Marshal's estate, seemingly attending a lunch party. As far as I knew, the meeting was supposed to be confidential as promised by my co-conspirators. But I ended up being paraded around like a trophy wife by my target, being forced to smile and sign autographs to the various officers in attendance. While they spoke meaningless chatter over the economy and politics, I soon began to realise how Heidler's name was omitted from their mouths, just as the talk of the coming mass demonstration was strangely absent. Was this an elaborate trap?

No, it wouldn't be. Theoneau would have had me shot during my transit if he wanted.

"Field Marshal," I made my growing displeasure known, "Can I finally have a personal encounter alone?"

"Careful what you say, Argent Silver." He winked, "There's a scandal in your words and I'm a married man."

"This is serious." I gritted my teeth.

"Right, right…I know. But there's a reason why I had to invite everyone." He muttered as he directed me to a quieter side of his small mansion. He offered a luxurious velvet chair carved from fine oak for me to rest at.

"This is about Dollfuss." I reminded him.

"Not Herr Heidler?"

"It relates to the baker but my primary reason for meeting you is the matter of Dollfuss."

"Which you want me to assist Heidler in removing from power…"

"Exactly. On May 20th."

"Consider it done." Field Marshal Theoneau stated, already evacuating from his chair with a glass of wine in hand.

Wait. What? He already agreed?

"That's-that's it?" I sputtered.

"That's it." he nodded, "Is there anything else you need to talk about?"

"Nothing! Nothing - I mean, when the time comes, don't get the military too involved." I quickly told him. "If Dollfuss are to demand you to fire upon the protestors -"

"Is that what we are calling insurrectionists now?" He scoffed playfully. "I understand. I'll order my men not to engage in Heidler's liberal revolution. I'll personally talk to the President to stand down if need be. If you want me to."

I stared at the Field Marshal with newfound worry. Either I'm too used to dealing with opposition from stubborn militarists or Theoneau was also planning his own coup in secret. Regardless, the plan must stay intact.

"The baker must have his cake and eat it too," I replied, "If talking to Dollfuss would guarantee an end to his regime…don't make it too obvious. The civilians must think they have wrestled control back from an unpopular regime."

"As for the communists?" he inquired.

"That goes without saying." I answered, "Society will be better off without them. Just don't make it too messy."

"If those are your conditions," he began, "Then it's only fair I have mine."

Ah, there we go. Perhaps, I'm not going insane after all! Negotiations I can manoeuvre around.

"General Zettour sends his regards. This time the offer has been altered: the failures of the Great War shall not be placed upon the feet of the Imperial Military and all those who held leadership during the conflict. Support for Imperial Re-Unification is mandatory for any further cooperation between our two parties. Refusal now would mean that Frau Heidler would become a widow before the leaves turn brown."

I felt something crack within my fist and I looked down to find I had shattered a drinking glass. Cold milk dripped over my bleeding palm and onto the carpet floor.

"If those are your terms." I seethed, "Who shall bear the burdens of the Empire's defeat?"

"The usual suspects. You have already mentioned the Francois but the honor and integrity of the Imperial military must be preserved from internal slander." The Field Marshal shrugged noncommittally. "Unless you have someone else in mind that shall serve as a tribute for public interest."

Author Notes: My college courses have started and future chapters will be further delayed than usual.

Chapter Twenty: I Must Say That I Regret Nothing

I took deep breaths and fought to keep my voice tempered and soft. But my blood ran hot as fire; I could almost feel the flames flicking underneath my skin and licking at my fingers. The milk cooled the heat like cold water thrown across burning coal.

"General Theonau…do you have a phone nearby? I want to speak to Zettour."

My voice was straddling the fine line between a bellow and a shrill. I didn't hate the Kaiser but between a republic and a monarchy, I would always choose the republic. If Theonau weren't going to comply, then I'd just have to lead the Austrian infantrymen to revolt alongside the civilians. But he made the right choice and directed one of his butlers to call Zettour on my behalf.

By God, I want to wipe that stupid grin off of his conniving face.

When contact reached through, the Osterrian butler handed the phone over to me after giving the receiver my name.

"General Zettour-" I began.

"Ah, my dear little Bellona," came a different but familiar voice. I was thrown into a minor stupor; did the butler call the wrong phone number? "To think I have already grown to miss your voice, Argent Silver."

"I'm sorry, who is this?"

"Don't tell me you have already forgotten me. This is Field Marshal Mackenheim, my dear!"

"I'm sorry but I am trying to speak to Zettour -" I said.

"Our friend Zettour is currently occupied with other affairs; you know how he lives…always working to protect his home and country," Mackenheim replied.

Only all too well. I thought bitterly.

"What affairs is he currently partaking in? This is rather urgent especially when I met his colleague, Theonau."

"Ah, Theonau…I remember him. He is a good soldier and I hope you found his company rather enjoyable, at least compared to us elders."

"Yes, well…can you get Zettour on the phone? Tell him that I am trying to reach out to him - wait, why are YOU at his estate?" I questioned fiercely.

"A reunion among old friends, Argent Silver, I wish you were here to see us. Have you met his granddaughter yet? Lady Larissa has been dying to meet you in person." He answered.

A reunion of old friends?

"What is the status of Germania?" I spoke softly, "The trade tariffs-"

"Have halted all international, commercial, and industrial goods movement between Europe and North America. While I am not too familiar with the economic machinations of Osterry, if you consider the situation in Wien deplorable, Germania will have to endure worse." He explained in a cheerful tone. "Worry not though, we will survive the storm, just like you said."

"Yes…Osterry. I wanted to talk to Zettour about Osterry. This involves him greatly. Hence I must SPEAK to him!"

"Zettour is, unfortunately, unavailable at this moment…"

"I can wait, Mackenheim. Just let him know I'm here."

A long pause. A suspiciously long pause. I damn well knew that he did not leave the phone unattended. Just as he recognized that I couldn't be fooled by such a simple act.

"I think not," he replied with grim finality.

I took another deep breath to soothe my growing frustration and sudden spike of fear.

Not you too, Mackenheim. Anyone but you.

"Please…help me. From one soldier to another, I must speak to Zettour. I don't care how egregious it may seem for me to intrude…"

"He asked not to be disturbed by anyone at this time, even from you. Now, I would be more than happy to discuss other matters with you. Your followers have-"

"I don't care what they are doing right now. I want to talk to ZETTOUR!"

"Patience, my Bellona, this is an opportune moment to update you on what your subordinates have accomplished…"

"Mackenheim!"

"I'm not your enemy."

"I didn't say you were, I was just-"

"There is no need for hostility between us. We're allies in this general crisis. Your men have..."

"You're delaying…" I concluded bitterly. I already knew what my fanatics had done in my absence. They made no attempts to hide what they were doing from the press. "You're delaying…"

"A harsh accusation, my lady, I am merely trying to -"

"WILL I HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY FOR MY VOICE TO BE HEARD?"

Another long pause.

"In the name of God, everyone's point of view will be considered. Yours will be the first among equals. Upon your return. Immediately."

Suddenly, the line went dead and the phone hung uselessly from my hand. The butler gently removed the device and restored it to its original station, leaving me asunder with my thoughts. Either continue onward to Yugoslavia to restore trust with the Progressive Bloc or join the militarists and remove any doubt they had of me being an autocratic enabler. As of now, it sounds like I can only put my trust in Lergen. As the head of the Reichswehr, he is the last barrier that divides the Imperialists from politicizing the military and corrupting it into a violent putsch.

I laughed bitterly at the raw irony.

Here I was, denouncing the possibility of a military insurrection while throwing my support for a revolution.

Curse Being X and his overzealous fanatics!

Curse the fascists and the communists too!

Curse Visha…curse her and crush her…forever and ever…

Please Lergen. Please say no. Please refuse to go along.

"So, Argent Silver?" Theonau called out from behind me. "What's your answer? Have we come to a mutual understanding?"

Mutual understanding?

What a cruel joke.

The only understanding we have here is that the militarists would rather let the democratic project die if it meant they could govern the ashes. They're perfectly content letting the fascist and communist bastards tear at each other and wreak utter havoc if it means they can be perceived as the heroes. Dollfuss is unpopular and his opposition is only growing, every soldier and captain should be aware of that by now, but Theonau was aspiring for a higher cause.

By making the unpopular president dependent on the military for security.

Killing Heidler and crushing the revolution through fire and steel would not cease further dissent; it would alienate whatever moderates Dollfuss has left to court. Even Albion and Francia would have to condemn the naked display of unchecked brutality. Dolffuss would have nowhere else to turn to but Imperialists like Theonau to prop up his controversial regime. But once the Field Marshal is done killing the liberals, socialists, and communists, he'll turn his men against the fascists under the cause of "restoring peace and security" to Osterry. To remove the tyranny of Dollfuss' regime, the same regime that they had worked to protect…

Heidler's growing revolution was a boon for the Imperial fanatics: all of their political enemies were coming right at them and the Ostnationalists made the perfect scapegoat to cover their plans for Imperial reunification.

As if the public is that gullible…

But at the same time…what other choice do they have?

The democratic moderates are hated and rightly blamed for the national humiliation and economic hardship after the end of the war.

The communists are just puppets of the Russy Federation.

The Ostnationalists have a very narrow interpretation of what constitutes an "ethnic Osterrian," already alienating a vast majority of the population.

The pan-Germanic fascists are no better.

The militarists just want to bring back the Empire. Shooting Heidler and his revolutionaries would just make the Imperial movement the least bad option for Osterry to take.

The false dilemma fallacy of the highest order.

"Yes, we do," I grumbled, staring back at the commander. "But I have a condition of my own, one that is also equally mandatory for further cooperation between us."

His smugness could not be more obvious and insufferable.

"When I announce my support, I will also put forward the criteria for good leadership from a monarch. I want to lay down the foundation for a stable and functioning government, one that would prevent the follies of the Great War and allow the average citizen to dictate their past grievances with the Empire. The people should be allowed to decide which claimant to take the throne. As far as I remember, the exiled Kaiser has a son and grandson for Germanians to choose from." I stated as calmly as I could.

Delay. Distract. Disarm. They can't stop me from providing useful criticism of the monarchy. However, this will require some careful tact and charm to rally the republicans to go alongside this farce. Perhaps I could manage a compromise with a constitutional monarchy? Like with the Emperor in Japan.

Yes. I can do that. Placate both factions in one fell swoop and save Germanian democracy.

"We wouldn't have it any other way." Theonau nodded in approval, before snapping his fingers to alert his manservant to bring me a piece of paper.

It was a piece of paper, blank and reserved only for me; a petition to be signed and delivered.

The Field Marshal handed me his personal pen. "Everything you said and promised…write it down. Rudensdorf is going to love this."

At that moment, I felt like a spider being led into a glass jar.

"Ah, Argent Sil - I mean - Tanya, welcome back!" Herr Heidler set aside the newspaper to run and greet me at the doorway as if he were a parent seeing his child return from school. "I hope for some good news today. The communists threw a bomb at a rally while you were gone."

"Do tell," I muttered slowly as I set aside my handbag and the few chocolate pastries that Theonau gifted me.

"Those idiotic Reds couldn't set the fuse right!" He laughed cruelly, "Richard threw it right back at them!"

"How fun…" I grumbled as I went over to the counter to glance over at the newspaper. Already, what little joyous mood I had from the meeting was immediately taken away when the headlines mentioned the Steel Legion of Dacia. It seems that the only reason its genocide against the Gipsies was only mentioned was because the faux saber-rattling Magyarozag had done it at my behest.

Took Horvath long enough to say something. By God, he was dragging his feet since Germania's election. And yet, even though that regent did speak up on the issue, it seems nothing more was being done.

No call to arms for a regime change.

No attempts to embargo or enact sanctions.

Everyone pretended that they were good at keeping their eyes closed.

The worst of it all, the fascist regime proudly proclaimed that Dacia would be 100% "Dacian" by the end of the year. I suppose the Magyar annexation of Transylvania did the one good thing of sparing these Gipsies and other undesirables from being murdered in broad daylight.

That's assuming the country did not deport them.

Once again, this event was given the tiniest crumble of attention compared to the overall trade war between the Unified States and Europe. Tariffs upon tariffs upon tariffs…As a result, political upheaval and extremist movements have been gaining ground steadily in even the victorious nations. From the face of it, it looked as if the entire world had collectively lost its mind trying to cope with the aftermath of the Great War.

The trade war and the lack of international shipping have severed the postwar boom in Albion and Francia quite abruptly. While Londonium had to contend with worker strikes and contentious socialist labor unions, Parisee started to experience violent clashes between the liberal and social progressive establishment and the far-right, anti-parliamentarian ultraconservatives.

Oh, the lengths to which America would go to collect its war debts.

In the Land of Opportunity itself, the American First Party had gained a popular foothold in a majority of states as many Americans seemed content to retreat into isolationism. It is such a strange feeling reading about how Americans seemed contentious on the topic of being the world's policeman. In my previous life, Americans always jumped at the first opportunity to make their presence felt in all the worst ways imaginable.

"So…what did the General say?" Heidler peered over my shoulder. "Are they going to help us?"

"You won't have to worry about getting killed," I replied. "That's all you need to know."

"Well…that's good news."

"Yes, though - Heidler, do you miss the monarchy?"

The baker-turned-rebel leader blinked awkwardly. "Kaiser Fred? I mean…I can't say I dislike him. Nor do I consider myself his greatest admirer. I just think he is better off if he stays out of Germania or Osterry. No ill will towards him but I think in this modern age, we need a different style of leadership. That we'll do just fine without him."

"I couldn't agree more." The words tasted like ash in my mouth considering who the man was in my previous life. "Are you sure you still want to do this?"

"Now more than ever." he smiled.

I glanced back at the newspaper. Germania managed to scrap enough funds to conduct its first payment to the Entente but everyone could foresee that the Republic was already falling behind. There was too much instability and hatred towards Berning's regime. Poor Schlage. I should write letters to him to assist the Progressives in navigating this hostile environment.

As for Germania's neighbors, Pilsud's dream has come true. The Intermarium led by Pullska has encompassed every post-Imperial state except Osterry and Germania. Daneland and Lothiern have formerly forfeited neutrality in favor of mutual defense for obvious reasons. Even Waldstatte, that neutral nation squished between Illdoa, Francia, and the Empire, considered joining the pact due to many Pan-Germanics there lobbying for entry.

"Don't worry so much, Tanya," Heidler remarked. "God is with us. Our cause is righteous. He will stand by us. We just need to put our trust in him."

"And yet, where was God in 1922?" My voice was bitter and mournful. "Where was he in 1925? '28? '30? '32?"

"Well-"

"Heidler, forget about God and focus on the now! Don't forget that what we are embarking on is absolutely insane! If there is no coherent plan as to where to take the country from here, we might as well not have carried out this revolt. It's not enough to remove Dollfuss, we have to replace his wretched ideology with something better. Something more rational and enduring so his pathetic band of worshippers don't crawl out of the abyss."

"Hold on, Degurechaff. I don't understand where this is coming from." Heidler said, "This is about that meeting, isn't it? What did the brass say to you? You didn't have to entertain them?"

"What?" I was confused by his last question. "I was just a doll to be passed around and admired. Nothing more…"

I looked up at Heidler and tried to discern his face. He wore a very odd expression that I don't think I ever encountered before. Well, perhaps I did encounter it in my past life with my father growing up.

"We talked about the future of Osterry."

"And?"

"How do you feel about the Empire returning?"

At that moment, Heidler gave the biggest sigh of relief he ever had since meeting me. It was as if a massive weight was taken off his shoulders and allowed him to straighten his back. The joy returned to his eyes tenfold and gave me another massive, overly naive, smile as he patted me on the head.

"I think it would be a very good thing. It lessens the burden of having to reorganize the government that Dollfuss polluted. Well, I suppose the return of the monarchy can't be that terrible. I doubt Kaiser Fred could do worse."

Worse in other ways. I wanted to say. The man allowed his government and nation to be taken over by a military junta, bloodless as it was; still a gross breach of trust between the government and the military. The idiot was content allowing his country to fall deeper into war mania so as long as he got to live and dine like a celebrity. All of the joys and none of the burdens of running a massive state.

But that is Heidler's plan it seems: overthrow the wretch and reunite with Germania. That explains his lackluster drive to formulate a political manifesto to distribute among his peers. Oh sure, rejoin Germania. That will totally not invite retaliation by the Francois and Albish. It will totally fix the economic and social crisis the two nations are currently undergoing.

Where do I even begin to correct him?

Just then, the front door opened to reveal Ruth who carried the stench of smoke and blood. Herr Heidler noticed it immediately as his joyous demeaning was replaced with newfound rage and horror.

"Hello dear," she smiled warmly, placing her handbag on the table as if she had carried the world's heaviest rock after closing the door. She immediately slouched against the couch in utter exhaustion. Frau Heidler reached into her coat and pulled out a pistol to hand back to her husband.

"We're going to need more bullets." She huffed.

"A shootout?" He inquired with a chuckle.

"A skirmish. The president is getting very desperate. He's sending everything he's got."

"Not everything," I remarked glumly, remembering my deal with Theonau.

"He'll put this district under siege then," Heidler remarked, glancing in my direction. "Assuming he has the men for it."

It was only then did Ruth finally noticed me, prompting me to get off the couch and embrace me in a tiresome hug.

"Good day to you as well, Argent Silver." She said with a smile, "Also, I've heard that the strikes on the railroad have been called off. You did say your trip to Beograd was delayed because of the communists."

What a coincidence.

I weighed my options. No doubt it was Being X's work. He wants me to return to Germania. To forfeit my agreement with Schlage and work with the establishment that endeavored to turn the republic into a failstate. The conversation with Mackenheim has only put into perspective how off the rails the conservatives are. Whatever they're planning is not good for the future of the Republic.

Yet, I will not be a plaything to Being X. My course is already set. I must be expedient with my obligations with Heidler.

If someone had told Viktoriya back in 1925 that she would work for a Judean as a waitress after the war, she would have laughed in his face for sharing such a ridiculous concept. After the Great War, she would be in Moskva, sitting by a log and warming her hands by the fire—a fire fueled by the corpses of communist traitors.

There is nothing more humiliating for a White Russy than to work for a Judean.

Death was the preferable alternative than to subject oneself to the killers of Christ.

Every good, loyal, and honest soldier of the Tzar knows this. Every child held this as the truth.

Yet, here Viktoryia was, being employed by a Judean in a cafe two months after seeking refuge with Father Schugel. Her beloved savior was long gone to Yugoslavia, leaving her behind in the ashes and mud of the Republic. Rumors surrounded her war hero like a cold blanket, that Degurechaff was in Wien and riling up a mob to overthrow an unpopular president. The things Viktoriya would give to be with her…

She had half a mind to wish for Tanya to shoot her in the head and blow her brains out to spare her the shame.

If her father hadn't died of starvation or disease, then he would surely have perished from a heart attack upon seeing his only daughter being reduced to a servant by the eternal enemy of Rus. He had done nothing but preach the dangers of Judean employers as soon as the family learned of her mage powers.

Lessons that echo in her mind like banshees in a graveyard. Forever wailing and full of hate and misery.

The pay was terrible. The customers were rude. The working hours were long and unbearable. How did her life turn out like this?

She is a soldier of the Empire. The right-hand woman of the Argent Silver herself! Visha had fought without question or regret, endured all that war had to offer, and came back home braver than she had ever realized. She deserved better.

She deserved to be by Degurechaff's side as her ever-loyal and capable assistant! Not be a servant to this penny-pinching, long-nosed, lice-ridden Jud-

Viktoriya's hand immediately went up to scratch at her cheek. Despite it being months since she last saw her greatest hero, she still felt her presence on her skin. Like a hot branding iron pressed to her face and stomach, a permanent reminder of rejection—a reminder of shame, guilt, and confusion.

Guilt for what though?

To be ashamed of what though?

She was only doing what was expected best of her.

Degurechaff gave her blessing to be the leader of the Freikorps in her absence.

For once in her life, can Visha be proud of what she was doing? Can she at least be proud that she was a White Russy? Can she be proud that she was a Slav?

That look of disappointment in Tanya's eyes was the most terrifying part of her dreams; the beatings, the screaming, and the expulsion always ended when Tanya regarded her as a stranger rather than a friend. No. They were closer than friends. She knew in her heart that they were more than just friends.

Visha prayed every night to banish that memory. For God to take away that night of dishonor.

Try as one might, she wanted to lay blame on the Judeans for her plight.

After all, her father did the same whenever something went wrong.

Are food prices too high? It's the greedy Judeans.

Financial troubles at home? It's the greedy Judeans.

Her older brothers failing German literature and science courses in college?

Why, it's the perfidious Judeans trying to prevent White Russy from achieving higher education! There is no such thing as intellectual regression in Slavs.

Getting removed from her post in the Freikorps? It was…

It was…

Well…

Argent Silver wasn't a person who could be isolated and manipulated. Viktoriya admired how each thought, action, and formula that came from the Major was her own. A truly independent person free from influence and driven entirely by her own ideals; a great hero who will tear down the rotten foundation of the republic and store the Empire and Holy Rus in their righteous glory. She was untouchable, insurmountable, and everything that Viktoriya was not.

But if the Major wasn't the one being controlled, then that would only mean -

No. She banished the thought for the 100th time. She would never. Her heart was pure and her mind was barred like a fortress. Her love was real. Her admiration was genuine. There is no sliver of deceit in her adoration of the Major. So if the White Russy weren't the target of outside meddling, then whose fault is it?

Viktoriya could almost see the Major standing before her, iron and immovable while bathed in golden heavenly light, demanding answers for her actions that night. Answers she could not give for if the words were spoken, then Rapture would be unleashed. Time and time again, she had imagined this confrontation in her attempt to regain the Major's goodwill.

It is my fault. I'm sorry.

Yet her mouth disobeyed and remained forever closed. As always, she could not say it.

It is not my fault. I was scared.

Was she scared when she heard that her idol was attacked and nearly brought to harm in Konigsberg?

Viktoriya wanted to say yes. Her heart demanded it be known. Her fear was real.

But her mind considered it an opportunity. A chance to get even. To reconcile all past grievances between the Slavs and the Judeans.

You are the most vindictive, cruelest, and insane person I have ever had the displeasure to work with…

The cold, dispassionate voice of the Major reverberates in her mind and soul as surely as the sun sets and the moon rises. The veteran needed help understanding; these traits were not disqualifying factors to have in subordinates during the Tzarist Era.

Insanity was loyalty.

Cruelty was assurity.

Vindictiveness was honorable.

Why would these traits bring displeasure to the Major? They were a joy to read in Russy novels and history books.

In her mind, she had done everything right. She brought honor to herself, her country, her family, and her fellow peers. What did she do wrong?

Hate was Power.

Hate was Strength.

Hate was -

"Frau Serebryakov?" Said the manager of the cafe, slightly tapping at Viktoriya's shoulder. His name was already forgotten since last week's interview. "You've been staring at the table for the last five minutes."

So she has.

The rose bouquet that rested neatly in the glass jar was the most crimson that the White Russy had ever seen in her life. As red as blood itself and just as intense. She remembered she was supposed to set up the table after the previous patron left. Slowly, but gently, Viktoriya finished her task with the preparation of napkins and utensils.

"Herr Babo wants to speak with you. It is rather imperative." the man continued.

Viktoriya smiled sweetly and thanked him for the notice despite the gears in her mind already rotating to churn out spite and bile at her boss. If it weren't for the duty to pay back Father Schugel's kindness and charity, she would have avoided this career like the plague.

But this was penance.

To lower oneself in the act of true faith in God and to work as a servant to others.

Even if they were the enemy.

That was the one part Viktoriya wanted to contest but lost the argument when the elder theologian invoked Degurechaff's name. A dirty trick to pull off yet it worked on her. Regrettably.

She wanted to hate him for it.

Degurchaff's sanctity was hers to own and protect. Not for others to abuse and distort.

Onwards she marched, contemplating murdering her employer the entire way until she reached the main office at the rear of the shop. Knives, bludgeons, bottles, and other instruments of writing were considered potential tools in her efforts. Of course, Viktoriya remembered she still had her two hands. Nothing compares close to feeling fresh blood on the skin of her knuckles or the impact of her fists rupturing the organs inside.

Why should she be afraid of this Judean? How can he, small and weak, compare to a thousand artillery shells fired at once? How can his words frighten her when a million bullets could not? How can his voice, shallow and meek, compare to the screams of the dying and the damned? She saw broken men, burned men, and bisected men falling thousands of meters from heaven and making craters onto the earth. The skies rained blood as surely as the debris of downed planes. Through snow and rain, mud and sand, Viktoriya endured the hell that mankind has created for itself through the worship of machines and technology.

Who is he to decide her fate?

By all rights, it is he who should be afraid of her!

"Ah, Frau Serebryakov…" Babo attempted to smile, "I'm sorry for dithering at the issue but I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt."

"There's nothing to apologize for." Viktoriya smiled while her eyes moved from Babo's face to his calloused hands. She will enjoy ripping out the fingernails to make the miserable worm scream.

"As you know, Father Schugel took me aside to explain to me the…dilemma you have experienced since the November Boycott." He continued.

"Of course, I remember."

After the fingernails, she'll start again at his toes. She'll make this scum of the earth crawl at her feet.

"I was very skeptical to allow someone of your…background to be part of my staff considering how rambunctious a White Russy can be. Not to offend your heritage, far from it; my main concern was safety. For me, my business and my family. Again, I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt that you are…striving to be better."

Vikoriya always wanted to try using a potato peeler to skin vermin. Her father did mention before that her grandfather and great-grandfather sought to be creative when interrogating enemies of the Tzar, especially when orthodox methods became lackluster.

"But my wife was determined to contest your employment ever since I chose to take you in. Regrettably, I must agree with her." Babo concluded grimly. "She lost a cousin in the November Boycott after all and she has not remained comfortable around any White Russites since then."

Forget the potato peeler. Viktoriya had the urge to shove him and his wife into the oven to be roasted for this insult. If only Tanya were here to see this injustice!

"I'm not trying to condemn you." he said with a huff, "I understand that there is a strong innate desire to find a simple outlet for anger considering what happened in Konigsberg. I understand completely - I was also angry and shocked when I heard that the Ace of Aces was attacked in cold blood. Just that-"

"No," Viktoriya spoke aloud, every syllable dripping in venom. "No, you don't understand. You can never understand…what's it like to be a White Russy. To not have a home; to not belong anywhere and have your God and culture be corrupted by the traitorous Bolsheviks."

Babo paused mid-sentence with an open mouth before slowly closing it as he took in her words. His expression was vague yet brooding and judgemental all the same.

"Perhaps you're right but I'm not your enemy. No one here is. We're Democratic Liberals, for God's sake. Regardless, I need to clarify that today will be your last day of employment. In addition for the reasons said above as well as recent economic troubles, you just don't fit in with the rest of the staff. They're not comfortable being around you and you…have a very peculiar way when greeting patrons."

Something snapped in Visha's mind. Of course, she is not good enough to stay. Nothing she does brings anyone joy, except the Major. Only the Major sees her for what she is. Only the Major can appreciate her worth as a soldier. Like a bear trap that bit off the ankles of a stag, her body was tense and prepared to draw blood while her hand reached up to remove the name tag pinned to her waitress uniform.

"From one veteran to another, I wish you all the luck in the world." He smiled with a hint of mournful exhaustion as he retrieved the name tag. "I truly mean it."

In her mind, Viktoriya imagined her fist connecting with his throat. A blow to the vocal cords to prevent a cry for help when her other first lands on his jaw. A flurry of punches. A hailstorm of violent kicks. Everything to reduce this Judean into a wet red puddle on the polished wooden floor.

What are you doing?

She could just hear her messiah behind her as if she were an angel sent by God to judge her. The words hit her like a splash of cold water.

What am I doing? Viktoriya wondered as she shook her former employer's hand. She thanked him for the opportunity to work and left his office with a pitiful sigh. She would need to return the uniform tomorrow yet her mind was the action she had just done. Allowing a Judean to establish himself as an equal to a White Russy… was a strange feeling. One that made her sick to the stomach.

This isn't right.

This isn't right.

He is the enemy!

Why is she greeting him as an equal?

WHY IS SHE-

Stop.

Just stop. Degurechaff's voice echoed in her brain.

Just Stop.

The veteran mage stumbled out of the cafe like a drunk, suddenly unsure of the world around her with legs of jelly. Where can she go now? This was the fourth job she lost. How come can't she do anything right? Why can't she do anything right? How can she ever repay Schugel for the kindness he provided her? How can she ever feel Degurechaff's warming embrace?

Her inner turmoil was halted her gaze passed over the crowds and landed upon one bald man with a peculiar mustache. She recognized him immediately.

Ludwig-Richter? What is he doing here?

"Ah, just when I thought Muller and Schugel led me astray." He smiled warmly as he reached over to pat Viktoriya on the shoulder. "Been trying to find you since the boycott. All I heard is that you've been expelled and the Argent Silver is in Wien. You disappeared from RNOD and none of your brothers were willing to speak the truth."

"I'm sorry for not alerting you earlier," she replied sheepishly.

"There's nothing to forgive. Now that I found you, we can get back to work."

"Work?"

"Of course, you are the most valuable member in the White Russy movement. Our champion to liberate the East from the Judeo-Bolsheviks."

"About-about that. The Major has made it clear to me that there is a distinction between the Judeans and the traitors in Moskva." Viktoriya explains, unsure if she believed the very words tumbling out of her mouth.

"Did she really say that?" Richter inquired, raising an eyebrow as he led her away from the cafe. "We both know not to believe in such naivety. The Germanic race is destined to rule Europe just as the Slavic race is destined to rule Asia. Our two races are brother nations, chosen by God to lead the world into a new age of purity and piousness. Hence why the Judeans sought to destroy the Empire and the Tzardom."

"Well, not in those exact words but…"

"But what, Serebryakov? What did she say?" he turned to face her. "Are we not trying to stop the red tide from taking over Europe? Do you want the Bolsheviks to infect Germania with its radicalism? We know what happens if they succeed."

Viktoriya furiously shook her head in a panic. Despite being disowned by her own father, she can't stand the idea of him being captured and tortured by the traitorous Reds.

"Degurechaff and I - we're both fighting for the same cause: a peaceful and united Europe. No more wars between our two cultures. No more bloodshed. The human race can finally progress as one. Is that not a goal worth aspiring to?"

Vikoriya wanted to say yes but there was that tiny seed of doubt that urged her to refute his points. Tanya did want to see the end of the war; the end of violence. But the method…

"That requires trimming the fat from the muscle," she stated, much to Richter's growing amusement.

"Indeed, the Republic is corrupt, rotten to the core, and its continued existence dishonors those who gave their very lives to defend the Empire. We are the only ones that are left who have a clue on what really went wrong in the conflict."

"But-"

"The Argent Silver will understand. When she sees the valor that we enact to stop the communists from destroying European Civilization, she will understand. She just needs to see it from our perspective."

"She was angry at me so-" Viktoriya whimpered.

"She will be happy with our results." Richter insisted, "I'll admit, I should have been with you to defend your judgment as you made the right call to demonstrate how the people of Germania will defend its greatest hero. You did nothing wrong."

"I-"

"Reclaim your honor, Serebryakov. Don't you want to prevent Germania from falling like Holy Rus? Don't you want to make the Argent Silver proud?"

"I do-"

"Then what is there to argue? Your country needs you, your family needs you, RNOD needs you, Degurechaff needs you! Not tomorrow. Not next year. Now! We need you to be the champion you were meant to be."

"I understand." Viktoriya mumbled, "I understand. She needs me."

"Exactly. Her enemies are everywhere. We must ensure her home will be a haven when she returns."

"I-I should go meet with Father Schugel first."

"Of course, of course, that strange priest." He nodded, "Is he an Orthodox or a Papalist? I still don't know."

"He is neither. I cannot make sense of his sermons even now—nothing but numbers, equations, and theories mixed in with God. There's something about the Rapture. About splitting Adam and Eve? Eve from Adam... feel like I'm-I'm..."

Too stupid to exist.

"Then perhaps you should return return home. If his gospel is nothing but a cacophony of pointless sounds, then go back to the church you were raised in."

"Like Father Gregori…" Viktoriya muttered, feeling extremely uneasy at the prospect.

"Yes. Exactly him. I met the man before and I'd say he speaks the scripture better than most."

"I'll think about visiting him. "

"You think or you know? Come on, Frau Serebryakov, you're smarter than this. Do you want to attend another sermon with Father Schugel?" He asked quite sternly.

The White Russy shook her head.

"Then the answer is obvious. Besides, your brothers are scared of you. It would be very good for you to return to them."

Her brothers…

Would they still accept her?

She should have reached out to them to stop their worrying.

She must.

She has to.

For her family.

It's been too long since she talked with anyone familiar.

Weiss. Neuman. Konig. Anyone from the 203rd. Where were they?

Elena? Where is she? Weren't they friends?

But, perhaps Tanya wouldn't be upset with her reuniting with her blood and kin. Right?

Chapter Twenty-One: Wish You Were Here

At first, Viktoriya's reservations urged caution but when she was met with a round of applause and ecstatic approval, they were reduced to shallow whispers in the dark recess of her mind. The sight of her father and mother at the RNOD meeting, smiling and embracing her in a joyous hug, gave her a warmth she had not felt since her conscription notice. There were no hints of bitterness nor foulness in his breath as small tears escaped his eyes in their reunion. Her mother, no longer bedridden, moved as if she were 20 years younger upon seeing Vikoriya's downcast face, before chastising her husband for being a dullard.

When her mother heard that she was thrown out of the house, that was the cure that dispelled all her ailments as she dragged her frail body out of bed to search for her only daughter. Her father was forced to eat cold sausage and wet cabbage for breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily without exception since Viktoriya was gone. Even her own brothers, Anatolii and Kolya, quickly returned to their childish antics of pranking their youngest sibling for a time.

For the first time in 12 years, the family ate as one. United and happy just as God has intended. Despite the economic hardship that befallen Germania recently, such worries did not penetrate the Serebryakov household. Not a single penny was spared in celebrating her return.

Whatever warnings Tanya had given Viktoriya, the memories of her chastisement and banishment, were absent completely. No longer did she return to bed full of torment or regret but instead, her thoughts were of Kieva, her true home. Viktoriya dreamed of a peaceful life, a good life, surrounded by an endless, infinite, field of wheat, the color of gold itself, glistening under the benevolent sun in the blue sky. She dreamed of her ideal home as a farmstead crafted in marble and limestone, as large as the Winter Palace itself, opulent and imperial; and inside, when she dared open the door, she saw…

The Major herself. Tanya von Degurechaff dressed in pure white, tending to the kitchen and children like a proper housewife. Their children. Blue-eyed, blond, and without a hint of inferior Russy blood. Viktoriya moved to embrace her savior but Tanya moved past her like a ghost, too wrapped up in housework to notice who had arrived home. Both saddened and infuriated by this disregard, Viktoriya grabbed onto her wrist to force her to stop.

Why won't you look at me?

Why can't you look at me?

Please. Look at me.

The White Russy stood in her own fantasy home like an unwanted guest, a stranger in a familiar land, as silence pervaded the room and beyond. In her heart, perhaps she had asked too much. How strange and unusual.

She got everything she could ever want yet her heart was empty and defunct. A hollow feeling that saw Viktoriya's melancholic smile distort into a bitter, scornful sneer. She shook Tanya's arms in a frenzy, knocking the folded laundry out of her hands and letting them scatter in the air like paper confetti. When that did not force her head to turn, as Viktoriya did not care if her expression was one of surprise or exasperation, the veteran moved to punch holes in the stone walls, hoping the imperfection would force her to turn.

The children made themselves scarce while she moved like a hurricane wrecking the room the pair were standing in, smashing everything of value, and ripping out portraits of blurred faces from the walls. Anything to agitate, to infuriate, her most beloved hero. To force her to at least berate the petty destructive activities that Viktoriya degenerated into.

Yet, despite the pristine and the polished reduced to rubble in a heartbeat, Tanya did not turn. She was as immovable as the Urals; her face permanently facing away from Viktoriya and glaring at the horizon.

Look at me, Major. Look at me.

Say that you love me.

Viktoriya begged. Viktoriya cried. Viktoriya threatened to force Tanya to face her with great violence. Yet her threats were perpetually empty. The Argent Silver has faced Mary Sioux in single combat and fought the entire world when it was bearing down upon her shoulders. The needs and desires of the White Russy were insignificant compared to the burdens of the Empire. Was it greed or lust that made her covet Tanya's body and soul so selfishly? To whisk her away and hide her in a mansion on a farm, detached from the politics and war of Berun?

It was only when Viktoriya reduced her farmstead to rubble did her hands fell by her side. Nothing remained of the humble glory and quiet prosperity of her life in Kieva.

I'm sorry.

I'm so very sorry.

I just want you at my side again.

I just want you to smile again.

Please. Look at me.

Tanya. Please.

Again, the Major did not turn but instead walked away, knelt near the rubble, and began picking up the broken picture frames. She threw them all in one pile before grabbing a broom to sweep

up the shattered glass. While Viktoriya stood and watched, Tanya began to clean. Block by block, panel by panel, the Ace of Aces worked to restore the household to functioning order.

Discouraged and defeated, the White Russy collapsed onto the nearby corner and there, she noticed a cracked mirror made of pure silver. Her hand reached over and grabbed it at the same time as Tanya. Only then did the two women meet eye to eye.

Though her mouth was thin, Tanya's eyes were of pure contempt, regarding Viktoriya as if she were a piece of mold, infecting the walls and floors with her poison. After a moment of tense silence, Tanya finally spoke:

G E T.

O U T.

Viktoriya looked down and saw that she had no reflection in the mirror. As horrible as it was, she understood. She was not wanted. She was not enjoyed. She was not meant to be here. She was never meant to be together with her.

Slowly, she lifted herself off the ground and silently walked out the front door with tears in her eyes. Viktoriya looked at the horizon and wondered if anything was waiting beyond. Anything at all. When nothing came from the horizon except the infinite fields of wheat, forever uncaring whose hand harvested the grain.

She wanted to wake up. Viktoriya wanted to leave. To escape from this world and into the next. To go and hide away from the haunting glare of the Major.

In one desperate plea, the White Russy prayed to God for help. Help to get back to Tanya. To make things right for Tanya. She prayed for salvation and protection…

When that did not work, she prayed harder and with greater fervor. Offering anything and everything as tribute…

Only then did He answer.

His grace hit her like a mortar shell yet it was the most comforting feeling she had ever experienced. A rare encounter of pious kindness and compassion that earned Viktoriya's eternal gratitude.

On the horizon, past the boundaries of the farm, God revealed to her the future. And it was glorious.

But she must do her duty. Great or small, she must do it all.

Only then, Viktoriya could have it all…

After the high from a family reunion, the family split off for their own affairs. Anatollii and Kolya went out to work while Viktoriya led her parents to her apartment to retrieve apparel and other possessions left behind. Truth be told, Viktoriya wanted to introduce Tanya to the rest of her family, to hear their story of exile and ruination, but the nature of her work meant that such openings were scarce.

Even though the streets of Berun were cleaned up nicely thanks to the blessed diligence of the city sanitation services, there were still shops smashed and marked as Judean. Their owners are nowhere to be found; either dead, missing, or choosing to remain anonymous. Viktoriya's stomach twisted in grim satisfaction and compounding shame upon a revenant echoing Tanya's scathing rebuke, though her parents passed it off as harsh justice.

When they finally arrived, Viktoriya found herself hesitant to enter the apartment. After all, she was still roommates with Tanya and yet, it felt like an unnecessary intrusion.

How pathetic must I be to have my own parents defend me? She thought bitterly to herself when she knocked on the door absentmindedly.

After a minute of awkward standing, Viktoriya finally opened the door to reveal an empty environment. While Tanya's side of the room was touched, her side remained intact exactly as she left it back in November. A minor time capsule of a life before the November Boycott. While her parents lightly explored the apartment, the veteran moved towards her desk to pull out a small drawer. There, it contained the gifts that she had wanted to deliver to Tanya after her return from Pullska. Viktoriya fought tooth and nail to get the autograph of Tzar Nikolas III onto these books. Il'in, however, was a lot more enthusiastic to give his.

The treasures that remained hidden right underneath Tanya's nose…

The books still smelled fresh. Untouched by Tanya's hands. The holy bibles of her people's movement.

Viktoriya felt the urge to burn them. To cast these pages into the fire and let their ashes scatter in the wind. She dared not think how horrible the fallout would have been if she had tried to calm Tanya's anger that night with these texts as tribute. It's best to pretend that she had never aspired to gift these works to the Major. For everyone's sake.

She would have to lie. The Tzar would have to lie. Il'in would have to lie.

But most importantly, Elena would have to lie.

No. Now's not the time to be paranoid about Elena.

She's a good friend. Her only friend. She wouldn't do that.

Elena already got what she wanted from Viktoriya's expulsion.

Underneath those books, lay her secret diary from the Great War to the campaign trail. A wave of nostalgia fell upon her when memories of the Rhineland Front replayed in her mind. Despite the constant presence of death and carnage, Viktoriya found the experience rather pleasant. There, in the Imperial Army, at least she had a purpose. She had power. She had Tanya.

The White Russy flipped to her last entry in the diary.

November 10th, 1932.

I must confess: I really do enjoy killing people.

Viktoriya smirked to herself. She did find herself enjoying the war as the peace proved to be terrible. To think she was scared at the prospect of putting on the uniform…

Finding a pen, the brunette made another entry.

March 29th, 1933.

I still do.

Tanya taught her well - killing was easy.

Killing was good.

It was righteous even!

She should take pride in the fact that she is the Tzar's greatest killing machine - Tanya's greatest warrior. Viktoriya can kill anyone and anything, including herself if it pleases the Major.

And yet, that flicker of pride was squashed by a wave of guilt. Tanya wanted her to play a bureaucrat for the Freikorps, a role she initially took with great ethusiasm though it's glimmer quickly wore off in the face of a mountain of paperwork. Good thing Elena was happy to take over some of her duties.

"Visha, my dear." Her mother called out, pointing a delicate finger at one of Tanya's war trophies. "What kind of gun is that?"

Her father immediately tried to come up with an answer but he was not present in the trench warfare in the Rhineland or Norden. It had the bearings of the usual bolt action rifle that he once used to fight against the Bolsheviks but the shape was all wrong.

"That is an automatic rifle, a SIG I believe," Visha explains rather glumy. "A minor victory against one stubborn enemy," Tanya told her the story once, how the father of Mary Sioux used whatever weapon he had to turn her into a wet, red meteor. How the Allied Powers broke convention to develop a weapon specifically designed to kill the Argent Silver.

That provoked further awe in her parents as they moved to gently touch and pry open the drawers of Tanya's study like sneaking...rats. She would have halted their prying hands, but her mind was on a different subject. Something cold gripped Viktoriya's heart when she saw the pure adoration emitting from their eyes. Not even in their happiest moments did they look upon her as they do on the Major. The coldness enrapturing her heart set her blood aflame. People don't even have to meet Tanya; they need only to see her portrait for their minds to be swayed.

A luxury denied to Viktoriya her entire life.

To add further insult, her mother and father were taken back by another prize in the Major's possession: the Kaiser's Sword. It was a royal heirloom dating back to the Napoleonic Wars; it was the last thing Kaiser Frederich did before he left the country into exile. An act of honor denied to even the ardent supporters of the Kaiserdom yet Tanya has reserved it to live in the corner of her side of the apartment. As if the whole affair was some minor inconvenience. The Major didn't even mention it until she brought it up one afternoon…

Then there were the portraits. Portraits and landscape photos of the battlefields they had conquered together. Since when did Tanya acquire so many? Aside from a group photo with members of the 203rd, there were pictures of ministers, generals, and officers standing side-by-side with the Major. All smiling. All celebrating. Everyone uplifting the Argent Silver as the Imperial paragon. All of them contained a signature of the most important people in Germania and the Empire at large.

Why am I not there? Viktoriya thought savagely. Why can't I be there with her?

Because you're a conscript. She heard Zettour's cold voice sneering in her mind. Your effeminate loyalty is no better than a dog's. Know your place in the Empire.

By God, she wanted to tear the wrinkly leather skin out of that old, decrepit man. He never listened to any of her directives when she was the temporary leader of the Freikorps. He never considered her opinions and worked to wrestle control away during Tanya's absence. He never cared about maintaining a unanimous front in the movement; the boycott to him was just another bullet to shoot at the Socialists and Liberals. No...never again! Zettour does not own the Major! She will protect Tanya...no one else can.

Viktoriya's father couldn't help himself but investigate Tanya's desk. Each opened drawer revealed more birthday cards and letters from every person of interest in Germania and beyond. Any politician or officer worth his salt wrote to Degurechaff, hoping to garner a single grain of favor from the golden child. Job offers to become lobbyists with an exorbitant payroll that could only exist as theories to the Serebryakovs. Even as minor nobility, the Kievans could never hope to acquire that kind of income.

It's always Degurechaff. It's Always Degurechaff. It's always Degurechaff. It's always Degurechaff. It's Always Degurechaff. IT IS ALWAYS DEGURECHAFF.

On the bookshelf, Viktoriya's mother noticed the odd collection of books inhabiting Tanya's bookshelf. A disproportionate amount of them were dedicated to the oriental country of Akitsushima; topics of history, political structure, and most importantly, the cultural arts of Akitsushima. Political treatises, economic journals, and military reports took up the remaining space on the bookshelf.

The White Russite could not help but feel saddened by the sight.

She thought that there was a place for Tanya to learn Russy history. To learn White Russy culture and literature. But perhaps Zettour was right: what is there to learn from a story of how the people were too stupid and gullible to notice the evil creeping underneath their noses before it overthrew their government and state? Can they really call their society just and modern? Worthy of admiration?

Viktoriya wanted to scream. She wanted to yell. She wanted to roar at the despot that there was something precious to be gained from her nation's history. But standing here, finally seeing the contents of Tanya's interest that the Argent Silver would rather learn from the Asian nation that humiliated the Russy Empire silenced her volatile contempt.

Despite passing by this shelf countless times during her stay together with Degurechaff, Viktoriya wanted to believe, wanted to pretend, that the books were anything but. How many times did she ignore that bookshelf willingly? Life was infinitely happier if she kept her eyes on Tanya always.

"Aw, this is cute." Her father remarked, pulling out one of Tanya's journals to reveal…cartoons. Since when did she aspire to be a political cartoonist? Hell, Viktoriya had never seen Tanya draw at all! The drawings themselves were very unorthodox; unlike her contemporaries, emphasis was around the eyes. Instead of dots, the eyes of her characters were large and expressive. It somewhat reminded her of the comedy films where the actors put on silly faces.

Finally, Viktoriya walked over to one of Tanya's collector's chests. The guilt of invasion gave way to the intense fervor to discover more of the Major. She lifted one cover and found war medals that Tanya had earned during her service. Except there was one problem…

There were too many damn metals.

Each drawer opened revealed more awards from the Imperial Army, Imperial Navy, the Government, and the Throne itself. More medals than Viktoriya thought previously existed. It proved the rumors correct: that over half the medals Tanya earned were invented on the spot! Her exploits created a new selection of achievements just so the Empire could categorize them all. The White Russy wanted to feel a sense of pride in the Major's accomplishments but all that she had within her was so much

SCORN.

Weiss had 18 medals. Konig and Neumann had 15.

I only had four.

Just four.

Small enough to fit in a cigar box whereas Tanya had plenty to decorate the entire face of a wall.

There was no ceremony for Viktoriya. No round of applause. While Tanya dined with the high command, she remained in the barracks playing cards and dice with her comrades. Whatever joy the veteran had during those quiet moments tasted like ash and salt upon the revelation of how pampered the Ace of Aces was.

Seeing the glitter in that war chest filled the veteran mage with newfound revulsion; a most sinister feeling that dug underneath her skin and gnaw at her bones. Of course, Viktoriya only had four medals. East or West, no one sang any songs dedicated to her. How many of her own brethren in RNOD could comprehend the trials and tribulations that she had endured? How many newspapers spoke positively of the White Russy? The Major held the entire world at her fingertips and Viktoriya wanted to hate her for it.

Viktoriya looked back at her side of the apartment and realized how barren it was in comparison. How…underwhelming with its shelves and drawers stocked with family photos and other equally worthless bric-a-brac. What does she have to show to the world? To her parents? To Tanya?

Nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

There is nothing present that could justify Viktoriya's existence.

But it was a small comfort, no - a great comfort, that God was watching over her. That God knows her. He sees her.

Viktoriya looked down on those two books, the texts that the exiles brought over, the works that founded the White Russy Liberation Movement, and wondered. What if…

What if Tanya doesn't know - doesn't realize - the gravity of their cause?

How important it is to stop the Red Menace from marching west…

She will understand.

When the Major sees the truth, she will understand.

She will have to understand. Just as Ludwig-Richter had said. SHE WILL UNDERSTAND.

Only then…

Together, they shall be praised till the end of time itself.

Once her parents were done gawking at another monument dedicated to her idol's achievements, Viktoriya dragged them out of the apartment so she could resume her original purpose of coming here. Once she stuffed the items and clothes into a small suitcase. With a shallow tear in her eye, she closed the door before locking it. Viktoriya gazed at that door longingly, as if it would open to reveal the Ace of Aces welcoming her, before leaving with her family.

Chapter Twenty-Two: A Shift in Priorities

"Don't throw them away!" Her father fumed as he moved in to swipe the books from Viktoriya before stuffing them into his coat pocket. "They are perfectly pristine. How many worldwide have the signatures of the Tzar and his Philosopher on the same page?"

Viktoriya silently obliged her father before moving away from the trashcan in a huff. Sensing discomfort, her mother quickly moved in for a talk.

"Your father shouldn't have disowned you," she said softly.

"And yet he did it anyway." The young girl replied with a wisp of fire in her words. This prompted her mother to glare quite harshly in return.

"He is still your father, Viktoriya." the mother lectured before her voice went soft. "But we still love you. We all do."

Then why didn't you look for me? The veteran wanted to scream.

"Did you find any interesting men to bring home?" Her cossack father barged into the conversation with a sudden vodka bottle in hand. "You didn't get into trouble while you were out there?"

Thankfully, the matriarch politely shoved her husband away from the small talk that was going on.

"Is there anyone you like?" she inquired of her daughter, now that her husband had brought up the subject.

"Just one. Only one." the brunette replied defensively, much to her mother's growing disappointment.

"The Ace of Aces? Degurechaff?"

Viktoriya nodded once before quickly averting her gaze.

"My dear Visha, don't do that…"

"What?! All this talk of loving me and caring for me and wanting me to find my place in this world but Degurechaff is not good enough for you?! She is the only mage in this entire continent that can destroy the entire Soviet Federation by nightfall but you don't think that's good enough for us. Why? I can think for myself! I killed men twice my age and thrice my size. By the thousands!"

"Visha…please…I know it's the vogue for young men and women to…explore deviant tastes." her mother paused to give one highly judgmental stare at an androgynous couple leaving a nightclub. Were they two men? Two women? A crossdressing man with a crossdressing woman? God only knows but if looks could kill, the disgust in her mother's eyes would have been enough to immolate the couple. "I don't think you should be part of that crowd and I don't want my daughter to be pressured to join in on that wave of degeneracy. It's an affront on God, tradition, and all that we hold dear as White Russites."

"White Russites…" Viktoriya repeated bitterly. "What does it mean to be a White Russy? In Germania of all places?"

"There's nothing wrong fighting for the Tzar." her mother assures her. "To fight for the liberation of the Motherland from Godless Tyranny. These people…they don't know about us. They don't know what we had to leave behind. What we had to sacrifice to come in…"

"But Degurechaff knows. She knows."

"Visha…I am your mother and want nothing for you to be safe and sound."

"And I want to run away!" Viktoriya snapped. "I should have volunteered."

"There is a man out there for you. We just have to find him." her mother smiled weakly. "Trust me, we will find him. We just need to look in the right place."

"It's that half-breed of a classmate of yours." Her father belched. "That bitch with shit-colored hair…what was it…ah, Elena the Judean. Cut her out of your life! She is a bad influence on you. Can't ever trust Judeans. Even half-breeds."

Her mother nodded in agreement. "I still can't believe the Imperial War College allowed Judeans to enter."

They don't. Viktoriya thought. Elena said so in the past.

"Elena is my friend. My only friend. I like her." She defended her classmate yet half her soul aligned with her father's words. Elena did betray her. Betrayed her and left her to be cast out into the cold universe.

"Judeans in the banks. Judeans in the schools. Judeans in the government. Everything they touch turns to shit!" her father bellowed, much to Viktoriya's growing frustration. It's a good thing they were holding this conversation in Kievan instead of Germanian. "Tzar Nikolas the First should have killed them all when he had the chance, instead of just exiling them to Siberia."

True to her mother's word, for the remainder of the month, Viktoriya was dragged by the wrists back into her greater RNOD community. While it was rather comforting to be surrounded by like-minded individuals, certainly when the male company did not demean or belittle her national service, it only widened the gaping hole in her heart. A gnawing pit that grew more difficult to ignore. Truth be told, it was window shopping for her. A break from her return to paramilitary training and street combat.

Granted, the men she was introduced to were undeniably strong and handsome; whether clean-shaven or sporting facial hair, courteous, valorous, and financially well-off - relatively speaking. These men were warriors, bred to be true and loyal to the Tzar, their conviction impeachable and honor undeniable. Their jokes made her laugh, their war stories invoked awe and appreciation, and their tales of exile brought tears and joyous hope for a better tomorrow. In the face of overwhelming destruction, it was comforting that she was not alone in the crusade against Bolshevism.

But they were not Tanya von Degurechaff; poor substitutes for the Ace of Aces. The living Saint of War and Death were insurmountable; they were not. Even the greatest of the White mages Viktoriya reckons she can snap in half with her bare hands. What is an iron stick to a tungsten rod? Perhaps in another life, she would have settled into a mediocre marriage, content to be someone's meek housewife to a soldier or priest. But here? Living with the knowledge of a clearly superior choice, she eventually rejected them all.

A grave dereliction of her traditional duties as a Russite woman.

In Viktoriya's eyes, however…

Good enough just isn't good enough.

No matter how many times her parents deny it.

No matter how many times Father Gregori prayed for her cleanliness.

She knows her love is real. As real as the blood that painted her knuckles. Oh, how the carnage sang to her heart! The crunching of bone, the tearing of flesh, the splatter of brain matter and teeth; surely, this is exactly what the Argent Silver felt every time she went into battle. It seemed so silly looking at her past self, the old Visha that would squirm at the sight of a bleeding paper cut, but here, in these streets - from Silesia to Saxony - plunging her hand into the belly of a National Vanguardist and ripping out his intestines proved remarkably easy.

Julius Rohr will fear her like he would the Devil.

Her love is real. How could it not? When God revealed his infinite grace and boundless compassion towards her plight, how could her parents refuse her? It was so…irritating when the truth was right before their eyes. The ignorance of the Patriarch, she could forgive; the

arrogance of her peers, she could forget; but the constant refusal from her family ate away at the familial love and replaced it with growing resentment. A sensation she purged from her body through an excessive application of bodily mutilation of Tanya's enemies.

The bloodlust is just…

Not enough. Not Enough.

Every skull she cracked, every spine she broke, every finger she tore off, Viktoriya felt her idol smiling upon her. An infectious joy that was only matched by the reunion with the 203rd. Out with the Freikorps, in with the Kaiserliche Sicherheitsabteilung…

Poor Weiss, Konig, and Neumann looked exhausted in their efforts to halt the communists from pushing into Westphalia though Elena, the self-proclaimed leader of the KSA, looked rather amused upon laying eyes on Viktoriya. Behind closed doors, Weiss took the time to explain Tanya's final words to him before her departure to Yugoslavia. The Major was waiting for her the entire time - to come back? Viktoriya's cheeks went as red as roses in embarrassment. It didn't matter anymore. She wanted in. She wanted to take the fight to the Reds. Interestingly enough, the paperwork was already filled out for her as they only required her signature; Weiss had been planning to reintegrate the White Russy one way or another.

Her parents, on the other hand…

"NO." Her father grunted, stabbing a fork into a boiled egg. Eggs, ham, and smoked beef were a nice break of change for dinner.

"Father." Viktoriya protested, "I thought you hated the Reds."

"It's not who you're fighting against, it's whom you're fighting with," he replied harshly.

"Who? Weiss?"

That prompted the aging cossack to slam his utensils down on the table with a solid huff. He glared incredulously at his wife; her expression indicated she heard the same.

"Weiss - what? No. that's not… we've already been through this before." His voice just fell short of shouting. "It's Elena!"

"She is my friend!" Viktoriya answered sharply.

"She's Judean. A sneaky, conniving little -"

"Elena is a Germanian."

"A Judean."

"A Germanian!" she didn't know why she was so adamant about defending the honor of her former roommate; her body felt the urge to protect the last anchor to her innocent past.

"She is the reason why you are so…so…"

"So what, Father?" Viktoriya demanded. "SO WHAT?!"

"So queerlike…" He finished with a sigh, dithering over his utensils. "She has been feeding you poisonous thoughts about the female body and the female soul."

"Does it really have to be the KSA?" Her mother spoke up, trying to steer the conversation away. "Why not go west with your friends in the RNOD?"

"They're not my friends," Viktoriya grumbled, "Not like Elena and the 203rd are. Besides, they just want me."

"It's not a bad idea." Her father grunted. "Take a few strong cossack men to the west and if Elena does any more Judean trickery on you, they can kill her."

Now, Viktoriya's blood was boiling. Elena is different. Not like the other Judeans that lived as parasites to the Empire. She was one of the loyal ones. The good ones that the Ace of Aces openly praised and defended in the newspapers and radio. Elena is a friend. A good friend. A great friend. Her last true friend.

Who else can she turn to when the Major is not there? Who else can she confined to?

After a while, it was only natural to return to the apartment she shared with Tanya. However, that meant Viktoriya had to be the one to cover the expenses in her roommate's absence. What a way to suck the joy out of her bank account. It was a minor consolation that she was out of her parent's house; she loved them dearly but was quickly sick of being dragged into an affair with a fellow Cossack. The truth is, she was sick in general. Viktoriya was neither the daughter her parents wanted nor the soldier the Empire wanted.
Well, "wanted" in so far that her body would absorb the bullets that would prove fatal to the real hero of the Empire.

The Kaiser's sword mocked Viktoriya. The photos laughed at her. The medals ignored her. Her spirit was slandered every morning and evening. It was enough to drive her mad in envious rage. The voice of the Major returned in full; her rage indomitable in the dark recess of her dreams. It was a cruel return to misery and wretched shame. Was Tanya laughing at her?

How does Weiss handle it? How does Konig and Neumann? It was almost maddening to see their relaxed if burdened faces at each encounter.

God has shown her the destination; if only he has shown the route as well. Yet, even that encounter felt like a false hope. One final gasp to stay noble.

At least she didn't have to stay with Father Schugel anymore. No more deranged sermons with pseudo-heretical ramblings. Since when does physics apply to holy scripture?

"Viktoriya…" Weiss' voice pierced through the silent air. With her back into the fold, the 203rd company commanders and Elena felt comfortable enough to return to their usual base of operations. It took the entire day to clean up the mess that was left untouched since the Major's return. "There's another meeting that is occurring at General Zettour's estate that you should attend."

"Why me?" she replied, perhaps a bit too harshly at her comrade.

"Because we're going to Hamburg," Konig grumbled. "A communist uprising is occurring there."

"A revolution…?"

"A small fire." Neumann corrected, "But we won't be able to attend the conference in the meantime; it's all hands on deck to crush the traitorous plotters in that liberal city. But you can appear in our stead and help Elena represent us."

"That's…good," Viktoriya said slowly, turning to face her former roommate. "Why me? You know what I did…I'm sure Tanya told all of you before she left."

"You're the mage who spent the most amount of time around the Major." Elena shrugged. Her expression did not match the joyous chirp in her voice. "And the most powerful now that the Major is in Wien."

"Yes, but…"

"Visha," Weiss muttered, "Our only concern here is the preservation of Germania and the legacy of the Empire. Everything else is secondary."

"But she did tell you why she expelled me?"

"It's best if we do not dwell on past endeavors when so much doubt is placed on our future," Konig spoke up. "But yes, she did. Weiss gave us a summary. Right now, we have greater threats to consider."

"There was another assassination attempt," Elena enlightened her friend without a hint of alarm. "The communists have been following her."

"Anything else…?" The White Russy paled slightly.

"She is fermenting a revolution to overthrow the Osterrian Republic."

"Well…that's good news." Viktoriya nodded slightly, "You know how?"

"Come on, Viktoriya." Neumann smirked, "Elena has eyes everywhere; girls have been following the Major since she first left for Pullska."

"Ah, of course."

"You can bring another person with you," Weiss added, "For the meeting, whichever you prefer. I rather not Elena be the only woman in that room."

"Your chivalry is commendable." the spymaster replied sarcastically. "But he speaks the truth; the guest list this time sounds unpleasant."

"Like who?" Viktoriya inquired, skeptical that Elena could be intimidated by names alone.

"Herr Schleich and Papier."

"I'm sure you girls can handle it." Konig perked up, "We faced worse."

"Should I call in the Tzar-in-Exile?" Viktoriya asked her peers. It was the first name that popped into her mind at the offer of a third attendee.

"I don't see why not." Weiss shrugged. "There is no better time to unite the coalition."

"You mean, 'our' coalition?" Elena pressed.

"Tanya's coalition," Neumann spoke up. "If the Tzar does show up, we would stand to gain further cooperation from the White exiles. We need solidarity above all else. Even if they are…well, I don't need to say it aloud."

"And that's where you come in, Visha," Konig said. "You're familiar enough to Zettour to allow for further White Russo-Germanian cooperation."

"Until he doesn't need me." Viktoriya gave a sideways smile.

"Ah, don't be like that." Weiss shook his head. "You're important to us. To the Major. To the Empire. That is the only thing that matters. Zettour is just one old Junker."

"Ah…thanks. I needed to hear that. So when does the meeting take place?"

"Next week," Neumann announced. "In eight days. Hopefully, you still have that black uniform."

Chapter Twenty-Three: Oh, Viktoriya...

"Father Schugel…" Viktoriya was gobsmacked to see that eccentric priest again. She could recognize that massive, eagle's nest of a beard anywhere. Like all the other guests invited to Zettour's manse, Schugel was brought in through a chauffeur; power disguised as convenience.

The mad priest smiled warmly at the two women like a grandfather reuniting with his adult grandchildren. Elena was far from enthusiastic when she was pulled into an embrace. Viktoryia couldn't fault her; Father Schugel always disturbed her whenever he got intimate during his sermons and recitals.

Unlike the stench of incense or sweat like Father Gregori, Schugel hardly smelled like anything. He was a ghost to the most primitive human senses; white paper had a more potent aroma.

Just when Elena looked as if she were ready to jab a dagger into the pastor's belly, Schugel released them both. His unfiltered joy drew fear and comfort from the White Russy, especially when his piercing eyes never left her face. It was as if a gardener had found the most beautiful flower in his garden and felt the innate need to pluck it and store it in a vase.

Hans von Zettour gave a pass glancing at the two women; his derision paramount as if to suggest he invited them out of plain necessity to placate the feminist vote. It's not like he cared about the opinions of the fairer sex short of a violent overthrow of the aristocratic state. The black uniforms did nothing to intimidate the Junker. He hastily urged the girls to attend to their seats like students guilty of late attendance and not punctual servants who arrived on the exact mark before moving to speak privately with Father Schugel.

While being led by the Junker's servants, Visha overheard the last bit of the old General's remarks.

"Is the clock ready yet?"

"Time. I need more time…" Schugel pleaded softly. "I need more time."

The Tzar was here. As himself. Was it a political scandal to be surrounded by Germanian bodyguards instead of Cossacks? Perhaps. Was it dangerous to have traveled to the Junker's estate alone and with a chauffeur? Perhaps. Did he have a choice? No. He knew better than to risk the ire of his most devout appeasers. Nikolas merely smiled at Viktoriya and Elena when they walked through the doors and saw him.

Was he grateful to be included in the invitation? Perhaps, perhaps.

Just smile, Nikolas. Your predecessors have endured far worse.

The Romanov was grateful that Father Schugel sat between him and his most fanatical servant. He could use the distance to breathe easily and relax. Nikolas merely sat in his seat and occasionally, lightly indulged in the finest Burgundian wine, while fending off polite inquiries from the other attendees.

A bitter taste filled his mouth. He was the Tzar. The Sovereign and Protector of Holy Rus! 300 years of Imperial Rule lie within him. Conversing with minor ministers and upstart bureaucrats should have been the least of his worries. What did their petty opinions compare to the tens of millions suffering under the yoke of Bolshevik rule? Who did they think he was? Some pawn in their game?

Nikolas sighed to himself as he watched Viktoriya and her associate, Elena, move to their seats. Oh, who was he kidding? His successor deluded himself into believing that faith could substitute for public support while he allowed his supporters to mistake his silence for his consent. The Tzar knew how dangerous his greatest mage had become, how utterly bloodthirsty she'd emerged in the past month, and it almost made him wish for the Major to return and bring her back to normal.

He underestimated how the Argent Silver could turn civilized soldiers into raging beasts. She could command her followers to do anything and everything with a mere snap of her fingers. No order was too wretched, no killing was too heinous. Tzar Nikolas I would have surrendered half his empire just to get Degurechaff as his protector. Tzar Nikolas II would have surrendered his wife to be raped by Cossacks if it guaranteed a sliver of fanaticism the Major enjoys from his men. But what would Tzar Nikolas III give up to obtain success and prosperity for his heirs and his people?

His dignity? His sovereignty? The very throne that he was destined to rest upon? Nikolas hoped he would never find the answer nor would the question come up ever again.

"Now, although some of us are already familiar with each other," Zettour began, feeling quite proud of himself, "As you all know me but to ensure that we are all on the same page, let us introduce ourselves to those still in the dark. Starting with the Tzar-in-Exile."

Nikolas' eyes shot up. He expected Lergen to be seated next to the former dictator. Regardless, he had a role to perform.

"Tzar Nikolas III, rightful heir to the Romanov throne and Autocrat of Rus." He spoke in a loud, crisp voice. It was important to always mention his claim or risk it being forgotten entirely.

"Father Adelheid von Schugel, Development Chief Engineer and founder of the new Positive Christianity." The bearded priest announced.

Chief Engineer? The Tzar looked at the elder strangely. He heard rumors of the mad scientist but the man seated next time him exudes anything but insanity. His posture was straight as a

ruler, his shoulders sturdy, and his eyes betrayed a fiery zealotry that not even the most fundamentalist Orthodox preacher could match. The beard may have made the man look peaceful but nothing harmless could come from a scientist who made weapons for the Empire.

"2nd Lieutenant Viktoriya Ivanovna Serebryakov." The young White mage said with growing confidence. "Adjudant of Major Tanya von Degurechaff. Who I can speak for."

The men from across the table snickered shallowly and even Elena flashed a small smile. Was it mockery or feminist solidarity?

"First Lieutenant Elena Muller." The brunette was next. Her resting face beguiled boredom and disdain for the pencil pushers attending. "Acting Head of the Imperial Security Detachment."

"How many Judeo-Bolsheviks have you killed for the Republic?" someone interjected in jest. Romanov looked over to see that it was Herr Goering, smiling as if he were telling a clever joke.

"If this were a competition, you would lose," Frau Muller replied. Her undisruptive tone was chilling.

"Ferdinand von Schleich." The balding man spoke up next. He was the first normal-looking conspirator on the line. Schleich was, like most bureaucrats, possessed a crude but clever grasp of the law, his countenance calm yet discerning while his bearing betrayed his martial service to the Empire. Instead of moving large bodies of men and armored vehicles, his war was the transportation of supplies, reports, and train schedules. "A General and Statesman for the Kaiserliche Vaterlandspartie."

"Michael von Papier." The other man introduced himself. In contrast to Schleich, Papier was the picture of government elegance and composure, as the word "diplomacy" itself had been stitched into the fabric of his tailored suit. He was of average height and build, with a slightly gaunt frame that suggested a life of deliberation rather than action. Papier's face was narrow and sharp, with a high forehead and a pointed chin that gave him an aura of intellectual foresight; his hair was neatly combed, streaked with silver, and framed by a pair of sharp gray eyes that saw everything and revealed nothing in the Duumvirate. Those eyes were too calm and too thoughtful, the Tzar pondered. "I represent the Argent Zentrum; we believe that expelling the Ace of Aces from the Progressive Bloc was the most foolish thing our Chancellor has ever done in his entire political career."

"Gustavus Norske." said the slightly portly man who wore thick-rimmed glasses and an even thicker mustache that would have put the former Kaiser to shame. Despite his rather unkempt-looking attire, Nikolas could see Norske was a man who still carried the weight of his past sins and virtues yet used them as a foundation for his career. He wasn't imposing like a soldier was, but there was a rugged strength present, the kind born of years spent grappling with the harsh realities of the Empire. His face was broad and weathered, marked by deep lines, scars, that told battles fought not with bullets or ballots but with laws and decisions. "And

likewise with my colleague. I deeply appreciate being invited to this conference but I would like to remind everyone here that the question of redemption for the Sozialdemokratische Partei has been already resolved by my presence. We do not support Erbel and Herimann in their endorsement of expulsion; we seek Degurechaff's reentry into the Reichstag. We do not -"

"The party will be redeemed." Zettour interrupted.

"It has been redeemed. I am here; I endorse whatever methods needed to bring Degurechaff into prominence-"

"Norske…It will be."

"Maximilian Meinburg." said the next guest before looking to his left. He was a simple man in simple clothes; the mark of an intellectual dabbling in politics as if it were a Sunday hobby. Normally, an idealist would have been massacred by the nature of government and rulership but Meindoff spoke with quiet intensity; boulders do not need to scream to be noticed. "Professor, Historian, and Leader of the Fortschrittliche Volkspartei. Schlage does not represent the liberal movement anymore. I do."

"Warin Kaspir. Defector Commandant of Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold." A Preussian officer spoke firmly. If Zettour was the model Junker general, Kaspir was the model Junker officer; egregiously stern and insatiably dull. He wore his medals with quiet dignity and subtle disdain towards the bureaucrats present, even if they were his overlords.

"And how many of the Reichsbanner have you brought over?" one of the attendees from across the table inquired eagerly."

"Over half," Kaspir stated.

Tzar Nikolas III was at a loss for words when everyone except him pounded the table in mild rejoicing. Not wanting to be left out, he quickly joined in though his late entry ended the small jubilation in an awkward setting.

"Rudolf Karlhold," The next officer introduced himself. Indomitable and immaculate, the veteran was a modern knight and a true gentleman for any Germanian maiden. The only defect was his right hand; the Tzar noticed that it was as immovable as stone despite the animated gestures of his other hand. "I represent the Eiserne Division. I speak for Major Johannis Bischaff. I also held rank in the Air Service."

"Bischaff? The 'Iron Eagle'?" Papier addressed the Freikorps member.

"The one and only," he replied with a polite wink.

"Pity we don't see more of his face," Schleich remarked. "We could use a little more male representation in our media."

"No need, I don't hold it against the Argent Silver." Karlhold chuckled. "She's the reason why we're all here, isn't it."

"Yes indeed…Theobald Duester. Representative of the Der Stahlhelm." Another standard Imperial officer but with a face as round as the moon yet there was no warmth nor comfort to be felt near him. Nikolas met Tzarists like him, specifically Cossacks; underneath that professionalism is a cruel beast. "And Frau Muller? I'll gladly take you up on that offer."

"Adrian Hugendolf." The next man said, dressed in a fine navy blue suit with a bright royal blue tie. "You know who I am."

He was not a veteran of the Great War unlike the men that preceded him but rather the chief propagandist. Tzar Nikolas may not know the face but he does know the name. His media empire was the largest in Europe; his name can be found in all the four corners of Germania, the post-Imperial states, and elsewhere. Hugendolf was a man of wealth and power; with a single pen stroke, he could smear any politician or general under an avalanche of slander and libel. Degurechaff was the only person immune to his influence, or so Nikolas hoped for her sake.

"Wilhelm Goering." The man smiled, his eyes challenging Scheich. "A fellow Ace from the Air Service and I represent the Deustchnationale Vaterlandpartie."

"Helge von Doric." Another politician; bald, experienced, bespectacled, humorless, and blunt like a hammer. Even his voice carried an indifferent dullness to it, miraculously nullifying the passion inherent in certain words. "I represent President Kurt von Rudensdorf. The head of state of this wretched republic."

"Kurnos von Westwald." This political actor was smaller but not less wide, with a round face decorated with a humble mustache and neatly combed hair. From the looks of it, he was perhaps the most harmless man in the room. "I represent the Deustchkonservative Partie - the original party of Rudensdorf and Zettour."

Now the attendance reached a full rotation with a man seat next to Zettour. "I am General Julian von Mackenheim, the Savior of Magyzarozag and other titles. I had the great pleasure of personally meeting with the Argent Silver."

All in all, Nikolas wondered why he bothered attending. He suspected that whatever they planned today would not concern him personally. Besides, he reckoned that half the men present had already elected to ignore the Tzar.

"Welcome all." Zettour greeted his guests, before bringing up a portfolio "Now, to business - I hope you have all brought your proposals concerning the next step in Germania's future. We shall begin with the current matters at hand: Rohr and Lutzebuerg."

Viktoriya immediately panicked, turning left and right, and the men reached for their small suitcases and pulled out dossiers, memorandums, and other notes to present. Even Father Schugel revealed his bible. Only Tzar Nikolas shared in her confusion. In desperation to be viewed as competent, she turned to Elena for answers. No one told her that they had to bring files! Her friend only shrugged before she pulled out the After-Action-Reports by Weiss, Neumann, and Konig.

"The Communists and National Vanguards have only gotten bolder since the Argent Silver's departure to Yugoslavia and will only continue to be brasher in their endeavors to hang us from lamp posts." the Junker continued. "While I do not doubt the tenacity of our 'Civilian Militias' in preserving what remains of Germania, it is more paramount than ever that we need to coordinate our efforts to defend our nation and our people from these parasites and degenerates."

"What about the Cossacks?" Goering inquired sharply.

"May God save us from our Cossack friends," Zettour answered, shifting a stern glare in Viktoriya's direction.

"You can bring civilization to Slavs but you can never bring Slavs to civilization," Hugendolf grunted, causing a chain of laughter from his side of the table.

"They're a virus." Duester remarked coldly, "Why can't they all just move to Pullska and ruin their home for a change?"

Viktoriya felt her skin as hot as fire and she looked in Nikolas' direction, pleading with her eyes to speak in defense of their people. But he was as meek as a mouse despite hearing the same words.

"That doesn't answer the question-" She began.

"We will address that later. Going back to the topic at hand: coordination. Now, capable of our militias maintaining order and obedience in the cities and the rural areas, they are scattered and prone to accidents with other friendlies." Zettour steered the conversation to its original course. "Too much mingling between our armed organizations, dual loyalties and allegiance, spawned countless petty rivalries that did more damage to morale and performance than Bolshevik sabotage. I intend for us to fix that."

He gestured towards the easel behind him that carried a large map of Germania, decorated with pins, markers, and troop movements.

"I propose that our areas of control be divided more formally, among provincial lines, where each of our civilian militias distinctly controls and nowhere else - unless the situation deteriorates to the point it requires reinforcement. Is there anyone that wishes to expand upon this?"

"The Eiserne Division could move to defend Pomerania." Karlhold stated, "Our Freikorps - I mean, citizen militia - could protect the coastline in case of Communist or Vanguardists uprisings in our rear. Our small numbers should be sufficient for garrison duty; we can't afford any more battles."

"Have you tried increasing your numbers through the Judean militias?" Meinburg suggested.

"Hear, hear." Norske nodded.

"Heaven's forbid." Duester shouted, cringing at the mere idea, "Incorporating Judeans into your ranks?! What's next? Teaching rodents and swine to be penny-pinchers? Oh, wait-"

"Now what is wrong with Judean fighters?" Schleich challenged, "You heard Degurechaff's words. If she says that they are honorable, diligent soldiers, then they are honorable, diligent soldiers. I have no reason to believe she could distort the truth."

"Have you considered that the Judeans are whispering in her ear?" Hugendolf said as he lit a cigar. The stench of smoke filtered through the air as the other men present began to follow suit. It irritated the eyes and nose of Viktoriya strangely enough; the scent of tobacco was more distressful than the smell of gunpowder and charred corpses.

"And have you considered that Degurechaff explicitly denounced such allegations?" Norske snapped.

"Sounds exactly like someone who has Judeans whispering in her ear." the media magnate shrugged.

"Gentlemen," Zettour huffed, "The bigger question is Hannover and Saxony. Who will fill in the gaps there?"

"The retreat looks far." Father Schugel turned his head. "From the looks of it, we will have forfeited our stronghold in Westphalia and our gains into Upper Bavaria and Hessen."

"A necessary move." Mackenheim stated, "Once our opponents learn of our reorganization, they will advance with great tenacity. By retreating first, we can at least prevent confusion among our ranks."

"Der Stahlhelm can protect Hannover." Duester hummed, "My men are eager to kill some Judeo-Bolsheviks."

"The Reichsbanner can move south to secure Saxony." Kaspir announced, "Despite our division in the coalition forces, we cannot risk underestimating that upstart captain in Bavaria. He has a larger force than the Spartakus Front after all."

"And that leaves…the KSA to guard our east in Silesia and our center in Brandenburg," Elena concluded with a shallow sigh. "Our men prefer a little more excitement than sentry duty."

"I admit that Silesia was rather quiet," Westwald spoke up in mutual agreement, "Perhaps the quietest region in Germania right now with plenty of loyalists in the police and judicial courts but it wouldn't hurt to have eyes and ears on the ground."

"You were an intelligence officer, no?" Doric inquired respectfully, "The calmness could just be that: calmness, but we can't be complacent now. Your expertise would be much needed to root out any subterfuge that may or may not exist in Silesia."

"And your men would be more than adequate to extinguish any fires that may arise around the capital, Muller." Mackenheim nodded, "The supply lines must remain unmolested when we enact our inevitable push into the West and South. No one here would gain anything if Berun was overtaken by a band of anarchists."

"What kind of plan is this?" Viktoriya muttered bitterly under her breath, quiet enough for Elena to hear. It's not the strategy that irked her but the intent. The men were vultures and jackals; with the Major absent, they could swoop in and claim all the glory for themselves. Whether to use their newfound status to challenge Degurechaff for Germanian leadership or as a bargaining chip for high levels of influence within her movement remains to be seen. But one thing is clear, when order in the West and South had been restored, there would be no pictures taken of the KSA. The Major would be forced to submit herself to the "Saviors of Germania."

She looked over to see the confident faces of Schleich, Papier, Norkse, and Meinberg. They passed words saying how they'll be more comfortable with the KSA guarding their electoral strongholds than the right-wingers but Viktoriya could not overcome her distrust of their rhetoric. Elena accepted their confidence graciously but the White Russy was as dark as a storm. Nothing but bitterness and naked contempt existed in her mind.

"What shall we do with the Cossacks?" She struggled to maintain a level of control in her voice. These were her people, her fellow exiles, her countrymen being thrown to the wayside. "We-they -are experienced combatants in putting down rebellions."

"I do not think we should waste our efforts trying to discipline a rambunctious sort," Doric grumbled.

"Yes, yes, it's a waste." Hudendolf agreed, "They will just get in the way of our endeavors."

"If they do, we'll just shoot them." Duerster downed a glass of wine, "Like any other pestilence."

"Moving forward," Zettour said, "If we are content with our new directives-"

"Moving forward?!" Viktoriya spoke louder, "You are neglecting a valuable source of manpower-"

"We will address it later." the old Junker responded with a smile, "On my word of honor."

"The same word of honor that Trianofied the Empire?!" she shot back.

Whatever warmth the former dictator displayed quickly disseminated into a cold, iron glare. "We will get to it. Later."

"Why not address it now?" Viktoriya shouted.

"Because we have greater concerns at hand." He roared back, "The imbecilic behavior the Cossacks displayed since November has demonstrated their utter contempt for a hierarchical command structure. Their base needs and wants are of no responsibility of mine to pamper towards."

"Eastern savages." Goering sneered before laughing with his neighbors. "They care not whose blood they spill as long as they spill blood."

Viktoriya was ready to tear his face off but, from underneath the table, she felt Elena's hand over hers before gripping it. The White Russy looked over to her former roommate in the face in disbelief.

It's not worth it. Her brown eyes urged restraint.

Heeding her friend's words, the veteran mage remained in her seat only this time, she glared daggers at the Tzar. The young man quickly looked away and tried to become invisible in his seat.

"So, the Judean militias…we tried our best to ignore them at every corner but their stubbornness has forced us to finally confront the issue." Zettour spoke again, "We cannot allow them to operate so openly and in disregard of our purposes. Disarmament is our priority."

"Disarmament?!" Meinhoff grumbled in disbelief, "In case you forgot, our country is on the verge of collapse. We need every able-bodied man armed and on the streets to defend against the revolutionaries! Disarming these militias will only serve to harm our defenses, not enhance them."

"Why not integrate them? We have no reason to suspect further treason." Papier suggested. "The more Judean guns on our side means fewer guns for the communists."

Norkse immediately pounded the table in agreement. "Now that is wisdom from my associate."

"Focus on the now, everyone." Schleich grunted, "And right now, we need more men and women in our ranks. It is not just about putting down upstarts and rebels, it's about securing the will of the people. The people must recognize us as the true leaders of the republic."

"Of Germania, you mean?" Westwald countered, "Of course, I don't deny the situation."

"Our victory is all but assured, my friend. The Argent Silver will deliver us." Goering flashed a small smile before reaching into his briefcase and pulled out more papers to pass around. "The future is what matters. Disarmament of the Judean militias is our first step towards reconstruction."

The defecting politicians of the Progressive Coalition scrutinize the document, their eyes ablaze as if they found something deeply heretical, while Elena took one look at the first paragraph before setting it down with clear annoyance. Viktoriya looked down at her copy and tried to discern its intentions. At first, the plan to reorganize Germanian government and society to be closer to the Imperial era was more than reasonable. The restoration of Kaiser Frederich was the priority though the DNVP was flexible enough to consider Degurechaff being crowned as Kaiserin Tanya I if the exiled monarch was too unpopular. She would gain a sizable portion of political power over the Reichstag; the ultraconservatives trying to centralize power around the throne.

But when it came to Judeans and their political representation…

"I'm sorry." Papier fumed, clearly agitated with what was being proposed. "But I find this agenda unworkable; overly fanciful and highly restrictive."

"Restrictive how?" Hugendolf raised an eyebrow.

"What his party is suggesting, and I quote, 'to deal with the Judean problem' is, what amounts to, restrictions. Restrictions on travel, work, where they can receive education, and even their housing. I'm sorry but what is this?!"

"It's not restricting them." Goering defended, "My party is merely trying to control their excesses. It is regulation."

"Regulation. Restriction. What is the difference?" Norkse inquired, equally skeptical and furious at the agenda. "You are denying us the Judean vote in future elections."

"You are undoing 100 years-" Schleich began.

"300 years." Meinhoff interrupted quickly.

"300 years-what? 100 years of civil progress." the bald general remarked. "This is a direct violation of the 1836 Rights of Judeans. As well as the 1881 Citizen Rights Act."

"And the 1555 Imperial Charter by Barbarossa III." Norkse added.

"And the 1776 Rights of Tolerance by Konig Frederich," Meinhoff included.

At first, Viktoriya wanted to speak up for Goering's defense. Her parents and White peers would gladly endorse this plan. However, her agitation against the politicians went awry when she read further down the document and found that the clauses were also applied to her and her kin. The DNVP was clearly building a racially-segregated society, using the Unified States as a model, where non-ethnic Germanians were confined to urban ghettos. Viktoriya and her parents would have to settle in a cramped, dark basement and make a living as rag pickers. If it weren't for Elena holding her hand again, the White Russy would have been halfway to pulling out Goering's spine.

"Excluding Tanya's role in this future government, we can't accept this," Papier said, returning the paper to the DNVP representative. "This ignores everything the Empire was founded upon. Disarm the Judeans, yes, but to isolate them? To limit their freedom of movement? No, no."

"It does not ignore 'everything.'"Goering insisted, "We are merely returning to 1910. The Judeans, the Slavs, and everyone else would still have their rights."

"What kind of rights?" Norkse tilted his head.

"They will have only the rights the government will give them." Hugendolf answered harshly, "No more, no less. Anything else is farcical."

"And who will make up that government?" Meinhoff challenged.

Goering looked around the table rhetorically. "Us, of course."

"This…has to be a mistake." Viktoriya muttered aloud.

"I can assure you that this is the policy the DNVP wishes to enact," Goering replied.

"A terrible policy…" The liberal professor grumbled quite fiercely, "My party cannot survive under the circumstances proposed by your…deranged interpretation of reality."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures, my good man," Karlhold remarked offhandedly.

"Desperate measures?" Norske fumed. "How do these measures help in any way whatsoever? The Judeans cannot live in a free and civil society under Goering's proposal!"

"They are free. They can live freely only if they stay out of our way." Hugendolf insisted, "This is a necessity! You've seen how many Judeans are in the Communist Party; we can't afford to have them vote for the wrong party."

"The Judeans voted for the Germanian Democratic Party!" Meinhoff protested, "Two-thirds of the Judean vote went towards us."

"A fifth for the Zentrum Party," Papier said quietly.

"He is not suggesting that your parties are being banned." Westwald cleared his throat. "From my perspective, the DNVP is introducing measures of electoral security, draconic as it may be seen. A necessary evil to prevent further political anarchy."

"Can I say something?" Viktoria raised her voice.

"Is it about the Slavs?" Zettour hissed, clearly annoyed at the sound of her voice.

"Well…yes." She replied with newfound iron in her voice, "This is not what I fought for…"

"Then what did you fight for?" Duerster asked sharply, leaning forward in his seat. "Money? Love? To become something you're not?"

That caused the Preussian Conservatives to snort in amusement while Hugendolf and Goering broke into petty laughter. Only Zettour was frowning except his displeasure was directed only towards the brunette. His cold stare demanded her silence for the remainder of the meeting.

"She fought for her rights." Norske defended her as he pointed at Goering's pamphlet with great indignation. "I understand the policies that the SPD has conducted since Triano may seem downright unforgivable and idiotic but, dare I say, granting female suffrage is not one of them."

Almost immediately, all of the conservatives and reactionaries groaned in annoyance.

"Germanian politics are poisoned by the communist Judeans and barbaric Slavs." the media baron complained, "Are we seriously going to tolerate allowing women of hysterical minds and frail disposition to decide the fate of the nation?"

"The DNVP is inclined to make Degurechaff the Kaiserin…" Schleich pointed out.

"It is because she is the exception," Doric replied. "Our enemies fear her more than anything else in the world. Her presence on the throne will ensure Imperial unity. It is merely a question of

common sense. The Kaiser will return to his throne but in the case of popular consent, the Argent Silver is the most obvious choice."

"Is that the criteria for female suffrage?" Elena questioned rhetorically, "That only the young and beautiful are given a voice in government?"

"Why not?" Goering shrugged, "It is certainly better than communing with feminist whores."

"Those women do nothing but complain, yes," Papier grunted, looking between his neighbors. "Expanding suffrage, however, did wonders to cease their pestering."

"Yes," Hugendolf nodded, "Except they now found something else to complain about: their bank accounts! What's next? Feminists demanding to paint their hair blue?"

Although most of the men found it quite humorous Viktoriya was anything but amused. Although she could not show it so openly, she appreciated the physical touch from Elena's hand; she gripped it tightly much to her friend's growing annoyance. The White Russy looked to her right and found Father Schugel silent as a grave. He looked dead with his eyes staring into space. It seems the talk of politics killed his mind and spirit. No doubt he retreated inwards to explore his abstract equations away from the ruckus.

"The irony of it all." Norske spat out, "Am I the only one who sees the blatant idiocy and hypocrisy of the DNVP? Putting a girl on the Imperial throne while denying that status to all the other women in Germania…this makes a mockery of Progressive ideals."

"Careful now, Norske." Duerster warned cruelly, "We enjoy your company but be careful now. Don't anger the wolves that guard the sheep."

"I recommend sharing these provisions with the rest of the party apparatus," Zettour addressed towards Goering, "Adding clauses detailing defining female exceptionalism; that only women of exceptional personal merit, not just the merit of birth or residence, could participate in this hypothetical government."

"It would help if they have a pretty face and long legs." the veteran ace grinned.

"Control yourself," The Junker huffed before turning to face Viktoriya. "What's the matter?"

What's the matter?

WHAT'S THE MATTER?

If Viktoriya could see herself, she would know her death glare had surpassed Degurechaff's.

"Do I not qualify to have a voice?" She gritted her teeth.

"When I gave you the Imperial uniform," Zettour's voice chilled the room, "I allowed you to become something greater than yourself. An opportunity to contribute to the Imperial project."

His growing contempt reminded her too much of her father in his foulest mood. All that's missing is a strong hand on her cheek.

"Instead, what I see is what I heard: you chose to spend your wartime service, like every other Slav, gambling with degenerates and getting drunk with swine."

"I won those games…" Her voice shrunk into a shallow protest.

"What do you want?" Zettour demanded.

"'What do I want?' I fought in the North, East, South, and West. I engaged in every combat scenario assigned to my unit without question or cowardice and I fought alongside the Argent Silver with all my effort to keep her alive. I liberated cities in the Rhineland and kept the sky clear of Allied bombers. I protected our fellow countrymen in Daneland and worked to crush communist uprisings after the peace. I have done everything you could ever ask for in a soldier and nationalist." Viktoriya whimpered, trying to hold her emotions intact. "What do I want? Perhaps some gratitude from the government? From my commanders? An extra pound of pork and beef for my parents?!"

"Actors and performers require a bouquet of roses after a concert." Zettour replied, "Do you see me demanding the Kaiser an Iron Cross every time I suffer a paper cut passing timetables and ledgers concerning the transportation of men and war material? You are a conscript. Bravery and heroism are expected, not rewarded."

"Degurechaff was conscripted."

"She volunteered to be conscripted since Imperial Law formally denied involuntary recruitment and tactical employment of armed children. Regardless of mage aptitude. Yet her talents were too potent to be ignored in the event of the Great War."

"I was the first to answer Argent Silver's call to defend Daneland and accepted any responsibility she would have of me. I worked day and night, often without sleep, to ensure her plans remained intact during her absence while you were hiding in your little estate waiting for the Major to save the day."

"And because of you, I have one nation to look after and six regions to reclaim. Now, what do you want in exchange for you to be…presentational?" The Junker fumed. Viktoriya didn't think the man could get this furious.

"Public acknowledgment is a good start." She answered quietly, "I want to not be ashamed of who I am…I want to be beside Degurechaff on the throne."

"No." Zettour glared.

"Why?" Viktoriya pleaded in disbelief.

"WHY?!" The Junker stood up from his chair and marched over to cast his shadow over the White Russy. Even Schugel snapped out of his daydreaming when he cowered in the wake of the general. "You ask that?! You who came into this world at everyone's inconvenience?

You are the most ungrateful, debauched, and pathetic Russite I have ever had the displeasure to grant an Iron Cross to. There is nothing but envy, lust, and insatiable hysteria within you. To teach me humility, God had every bullet enter the heart of a Germanian in the Great War when it should have entered a Slav or Judean. But since the weak-willed liberals and socialist traitors were in power after Triano, I had to sit back and watch the Asianic hordes plunder Germania in their effort to find another pint of vodka and sing their obnoxious din they call music. It is the feminine naivety of the Argent Silver that allows you and your mongoloid race to remain here and make a mockery of the Double-Headed Dragon.

I would sooner let the Francois annex the Rhineland and Lower Lothiern than let you corrupt the Argent Silver's image. My body would be consumed by maggots before Germania's throne be influenced by Slavo-Asians!"

The room was as silent as a tomb; the reactionaries were smug, the conservatives were apathetic, and the defecting Progressives and Mackenheim looked at her with muted sympathy. Once again, Viktoriya looked at the Tzar, pleading with her eyes to say something. His mouth did not move. Nikolas merely got up from his seat and excused himself from the table. Zettour did not bother to acknowledge him.

Elena, however, was the only person who whispered something discreet in Viktoriya's ear. Although her hand was united with Viktoriya and hidden under the table, Zettour was about to unleash something foul when he began to walk over to stand between them.

"Zettour…" The preacher whispered, almost pleading with him to show restraint.

"I'm sorry, Schugel. Do you want to say something?" Zettour turned around to glare at the old man. All of a sudden, everyone's eyes were on the priest.

"Ummmm…" Schugel looked back awkwardly before turning to face Viktoriya. Now it was her turn to stare off into clouds; her expression deadpan and void of any witty reply. The only semblance of emotion is a cold frown slowly creeping over her face. "Yes…I believe the DNVP - Goering - mentioned marriage concerning the Argent Silver."

Almost immediately, everyone who hadn't returned the copy looked over the proposal again. Sure enough, there was the idea presented of a royal wedding in the case of Degurechaff's ascension to the throne. Viktoriya slowly looked down and reviewed the words with growing horror, multiplying wrath and exponential regret.

"She is young and we need to secure her power for future descendants." Goering explained, "We cannot let this potency be a dot in our nation's history."

"Weiss is the most powerful male mage of our time, is he not?" Doric inquired.

Zettour nodded, looking a lot calmer now that the conversation moved to a more productive subject. "You are correct. A union between Weiss and Degurechaff would only ensure, and guarantee, a worthy heir to the title. For this conflict and the next ever onwards. Our enemies are eternal but so is our vigilance."

"Except for one issue," Elena spoke up, her professionalism ever undisturbed. "Weiss is already engaged to another. He has a fiance."

"Kaiser Charlemagne had four wives." Westwald countered, "We can grant him the exception."

"What a lucky man." Duerster chuckled, "He can use one woman to fuck and the other to breed."

"Which woman is Degurechaff?" Meinhoff replied coldly.

"I wouldn't want to be Weiss when he has to answer that question," Karlhold remarked.

"Would Weiss even consider this…double marriage?" Papier asked.

"If his loyalty and honor are true," Zettour answered, "Then he will do his duty with the Argent Silver and give Germania an heir. If the Church disapproves, his fiance can become his mistress at his leisure."

At that moment, Viktoriya got out of her seat with a poisonous glare at the attendees, the kind of anger that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah and left a massive crater in their place, before leaving the room at a quick pace. For a second, Father Schugel thought he was imagining things; he could have sworn he saw a flash of gold in Viktoriya's eyes. Elena followed suit, silently retrieving her files and a copy of the DNVP agenda, before catching up to her comrade.

"One more thing." The host called out after Viktoriya, prompting her to stop in her tracks for a moment. "The next Slav I see harassing a Germanian, I'll hang!"

The threat was made clear enough…

"The rest of you." Zettour glared at Papier, Shleich, Norske, and Meinhoff, frozen halfway from leaving their chairs. "Stay and speak no more about this 'right' or that 'right.' We have greater things to discuss."

"But…" Papier began.

"What about OUR rights, Papier?" Zettour boomed, "Have you ever considered that? What we, as Germanians, stand to lose with each slanderous reform?! Do you want us to end up like the Russy Empire? Is that to be our legacy in the next century?"

As the two girls disappeared down the hall, the Junker's butler entered.

"A call from Osterry," he announced.

"Hang up," Zettour ordered.

"It's from the Theonau Estate. Sir, it's urgent."

"Hang. Up."

"It's Degurechaff. She is calling and wanting to speak with you."

Upon hearing her name, Zettour quickly turned around to face his old ally.

"Mackenheim, distract her." he half-requested, half-demanded.

With a huff, the old hussar left the table and followed the butler into another room.

Life was hollow. Although her KSA uniform was meant to inspire terror and awe to those who dared gaze upon it, Viktoriya never felt so naked. It took every ounce of self-restraint to not drive her fist through her reflection in the car window; it was a simple, blurry image of herself yet she could not stand the sight of it. Getting driven back to her apartment was a small luxury that Zettour could afford so generously. Perhaps he was expecting an ambush by a communist cell or a Vanguard squadron while on the road. A death she would gladly accept in the moment.

Her friend, Elena, was unusually quiet and brooding though she brushed a hand against Vikoriya's arm. Usually, they would talk and gossip over a cup of coffee but her appetite was as ruined as her afternoon. Lunch was unappealing and she felt too disgraced to enjoy dinner. Viktoriya wanted to scream and run towards home to shed her tears in her mother's arms. But what does that prove? That she was still a stupid little girl that ran to her parents at the slightest mishap? How can the Major look at her with respect and affinity then?

Viktoriya didn't protest much when Elena dragged her by the hand when the car left them at their destination. Once again, the door that led to their apartment and the center of Degurechaff's movement sent her back into that night in November. The hate. The anger. The overwhelming shame. All at once, her memories since then replayed in her mind as if it were a film mocking her existence. Every drop of blood, every tear shed, all flashed before her eyes as Elena laid her down on the couch and removed her coat.

For a second, Viktoriya thought she was about to enter an intimate affair with Elena when she saw her friend shed an extra layer of clothing. But instead, her former roommate disappeared into the back. The sounds of cabinets being opened and the coffee pot being filled indicated that she was in the rear kitchen.

She later emerged with an apron carrying a tray laden with tomato and bacon sandwiches, two large steaming coffee mugs, and a few pieces of chocolate and strawberries.

"Eat." Elena urged her in a soft tone. "I've been saving these for a moment like this."

"You always know how to cheer a girl up." Viktoriya smiled weakly.

"Just you," she remarked while she later moved to sort through the mail before coming across a hidden note. "And Viktoriya…"

"Yes?"

"It's not your fault."

"I…"

"It's not your fault."

"Elena…"

"It's not your fault."

"WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?" Viktoriya roared before immediately covering her mouth with both hands. The dam was broken and tears flowed freely down her face.

"Nobody trusts a half-Judean these days…" Elena sighed as she took the hidden note, crumpled it, and tossed the paper ball into the fireplace. She struck a match and lit the hearth for good measure. "Everyone always assumes we want something…Can't a woman just make love to her friend?"

"My father told me not to - What?" The White Russy's face immediately looked up.

"Now I have your attention. Here's a handkerchief."

The brunette tossed it in her face and Viktoriya immediately used it to wipe her face of tears and snot.

"Don't overvalue the words from those idiotic men," she said. "Don't believe for a second that they hold Degurechaff in their best interests. We both know better than that. We're the ones who worked for her, who fought for her, in this abomination of a republic after all."

"Yes." Viktoriya nodded slowly.

"So why cry? Their words have power if you give them power. So ignore them. They are old men anyway. They'll die out soon enough; if Tanya allows it, I can expedite the process."

That brought out a couple of laughs from the White Russy though the tears did not stop.

"What did you burn?" Viktoriya asked quietly.

"Nothing," she answered, taking a bite of her sandwich.

"Nothing is something when it comes to you. What is it?"

"If I told you, I would have to kill you…"

"Do you think I'm scared for my life?" the White Russy hissed, "You may be an intelligence agent, but I served on the frontlines and saw death and decay in every corner. I am a Cossack; I learned how to die the moment I was born."

"It's a package." Elena finally answered with a long, drawn-out huff. "Is that satisfactory enough?"

The two women began to eat in silence. The warm food did wonders to wipe away the cold shame that consumed Viktoriya's soul and soon she began to consume her sandwich with great vigor until there was not a single crumb left. But as quickly as she found her confidence, it immediately left her like a morning mist under the rising sun. It also didn't help that Elena was frowning as if she was forced to play host to an unwanted guest.

"Now that I have given you the answer…" she began, "Mind finishing what you said about your father?"

"It's…um…stupid." Viktoriya shook her head lightly.

"Nothing is stupid when it concerns you."

"He told me not to trust you."

"That is the wisest thing he has ever said about me. What other pearls of wisdom has he shared with you since November?"

"That I wasn't his daughter anymore…"

"And your brothers?"

"Too many things were happening in their lives to search for me…"

"A sign then," Elena hummed a shallow tune, "It's high time for young birds to leave the nest."

"But we're not birds." Viktoriya looked up. "We're bears."

"And wolves." Elena smiled, "Regardless, they're only holding you back. It's high time for you to push forward alone."

"Is that what your parents told you?"

"They didn't want me…"

"Oh…" The White Russy felt embarrassed at her question yet it spawned so much curiosity within her. Elena rarely, if ever, mentioned anything about her family during their days together at the academy. "Why?"

"If we're going to share secrets, you start first." Elena's brown eyes met Viktoriya's blue.

"This never leaves this room, nor this entire building…Don't tell Tanya a single thing." She requested before emptying her cup of coffee.

"On my word of honor." the spymaster smiled.

"My youngest kill was an eight-year-old boy."

"Was he Judean?"

"I think so. He had a big nose for a small boy."

"How did he become a target?"

"He stole my brother's face," Viktoriya confessed. "He looked so much like Anatolii before he lost his…uh…nose. I hated him for it. I hated how he was so happy; so precious…while my brother lost everything. Anatolii didn't have a happy ending after the Great War but that little boy

did…and I couldn't accept it. I was so angry that I refused to accept it so I dragged him into an alley and smashed his face in with a brick. I just couldn't stop…wouldn't stop."

"And he didn't run away to his family?" Elena inquired.

"Even if he did survive, he was blind, deaf, and mute once I was done with him; he didn't have any teeth nor a tongue to use."

"Most impressive. I'm surprised no one found out."

"Yes." Viktoriya stared blankly ahead, "It was. Now, your turn."

Elena laughed softly before leaving her seat to put away the coffee and plates. She gestured for her friend to follow her to the kitchen. "I love these types of conversations…it makes friendships so much more interesting."

"What's your youngest kill?" the veteran mage demanded.

"Eight months old - He was my baby brother."

Viktoriya immediately locked into place, stunned at the answer, while she regarded her former roommate with a new feeling of terror. It's one thing to kill a child…but to commit…kinslaying? Elena suddenly looked a lot less like a housewife cleaning the pantry and more like a butcher preparing the next slab of meat.

"My parents hated me the moment I was conceived," the brunette explained as she washed her hands before making her way towards the garage but not without grabbing a crowbar first.

Like a lamb being led into the slaughterhouse, Viktoriya silently followed in her footsteps. The garage could use some dusting as there were boxes yet to be emptied or thrown out. But at the center of the space, was a wooden crate that seemed to be stuffed with straw.

"The moment I understood their hate, I sought to find an alternative family hence why I joined the Imperial Academy - where I met you." Elena continued as she pointed to the crowbar at Viktoriya before moving to unopen the crate. "I was perfectly content in the Army but when I heard that my mother was pregnant again, it could only mean one thing: that I was getting replaced."

She stuck the crowbar underneath the lid and began to push down. The crate made a sickening sound and a foul smell invaded the room in an instant. A smell that could kill the nose and attack the eyes but Viktoriya was a veteran of the Great War; it paled in comparison to the stench of war.

"Of course, looking back now, it was a logical conclusion that they would disinherit me and cut me entirely out of the family tree. Initially, I was naively optimistic but do you know God's honest truth? I preferred being the only child."

"What did you do…?" Viktoriya whispered, hating herself for wanting to hear the answer so badly.

Elena was already halfway done opening the lid when she finally turned her head to face her. Brown eyes never looked so terrifying to the White Russy until now.

"I used him as evidence of my loyalty to the Empire. Because that is what matters most. Not your name. Not your family. Not your God. Your parents will die. As would you. As would me. As would Degurechaff. All of us, dead. All of us rotting in the ground. It is the Double-Headed Dragon that lives on. It is the only thing that lives on. Not honor. Not glory. We lost because too many people put too much of their own petty, squabbling interests before the interest of the Empire. The Empire must live on. The Argent Silver must live on."

"So the rumor was true then…" Viktoriya remarked quietly, "You…"

"Where did you hear of it?" Elena paused before the final nail in the crate.

"Weiss told me. He claimed that Lergen told him in a private letter," she answered.

Elena hummed thoughtfully, seemingly unsurprised by the revelation, as she moved again to finally remove the lid. Curiosity got the better of Viktoriya as she walked to stand beside her friend and looked down to examine the contents.

Inside was a man. A dirty, wounded, scared shell of a man. His fingernails were pulled off. A crown of barbed wire sat upon his head and dug into his scalp. His mouth was sewn shut; forbidding him to say anything more than a few pleading moans. The straw that made his bed was completely soaked in his own bodily fluids.

"Hello, my dear old friend. We had fun while it lasted." Elena smiled, looking down at him like a snake spotting a dying mouse. "How was Krakau?"

Both girls looked at each other once again. Their expressions could not be more different: Viktoriya was confused, disturbed, and highly intrigued by the idea of being let in on a secret while Elena looked as if she was showing off a private butterfly collection: full of pride and cruel satisfaction.

"I must confess…" the half-Judean remarked to her friend, "I have been squandering our resources to search for this man since Foerster told us about Konigsberg - before Argent Silver had me silence him."

"Tanya's assassin…" Viktoria's eyes grew wide; the realization struck her like lightning. "But how…he must have friends in Krakau."

Elena nodded as she closed the lid over her captive. His arms were outstretched; almost begging for the White Russy to save him. But a block of wood once again confined him in the dark.

"He did. As did I," she explained. "And the Major had plenty of admirers in the city. If he had fled north across the Baltic Sea instead of south, he would have lived a little while longer."

"Why are you showing me this?"

"To get you to understand. The Argent Silver is coming home with a revolution on her back and we must prepare for Germania to burn when she does. No matter who or what gets in our way."

"A revolution…like?"

"Bastille."

"Ah." Viktoriya gave a warped smile, already drawing plans to wipe this conversation out of her memories. "Like Napoleon, the greatest revolutionary."

"Don't be so naive," Elena laughed. "The greatest revolutionary was Robespierre."

Chapter Twenty-Four: I Dream of Steel and Fire

"Out of all the people that I became a guest under, it had to be you," I muttered under my breath as I finished folding the dress that Ruth had gifted me. After I slammed my luggage bag closed, I turned around to see Heidler resting on a chair, his back leaning against the edge of the wooden desk, while he fiddled with a pen between his fingers. "It has been strange being productive in your presence."

It was the truth. The man in my past life was synonymous with a military uniform; to see him wearing a simple white shirt with beige lederhosen and suspenders will always be uncanny.

"Was it an accident or providence?" Heidler returned a sly smile as he reviewed my speech. "Finding the answer will drive any man insane."

It was not one of my best works that I had conjured since the meeting but who else could I blame? The communists were already denounced. I made my anger known to the fascists. I refused to become a hypocrite and join the anti-semitic garbage bin; even after Konigsberg. The militarists want their beloved institutions protected but if they bother reading my past statements, they would know that my words have all but condemned the Imperial Armed Forces for their egoism during the Great War. This left the liberals and the conservatives as the last people to be sent to the executioner's block.

All in the name of keeping the Imperial fanatics complacent so that Heidler's revolution would succeed. I tried to keep my tone professional, with minimal words to provoke emotional outrage, to at least give some ground for the liberal movement to stay afloat in the sea of extremists. Vagueness would be my greatest tool here - I suppose I am a better politician than I would like to admit. The Liberal Democratic Party in Japan should have me as their Prime Minister!

The joke was empty; one last attempt at my inner conscious coping with reality. My status, once implicated and now acknowledged, would give an air of legitimacy to military coups and popular uprisings for the next century. So long as there are Argent Silvers in Asia, Europe, and North America, democracy will never truly flourish. I have to put my hope in Heidler to do the right thing. What. A. Joke.

I must have stared unreasonably long at his face as he shifted uncomfortably and set his eyes to flicker back and forth on my speech. He was an artist and a backer - I could tell immediately he was faux-reviewing my speech.

I just have to hope for the best. It's the least I could do.

"Is it simple enough to understand?" I inquired as politely as possible.

"Well…" Heidler tapped on the paper, trying to look clever, "It's not what I expected. I don't know if Theoneau would accept this - I mean, I'm sure he would if he just wanted to support the return of the Empire but…"

"But what?"

"Nothing. Forgive me for my ramblings."

"Confidence is your greatest ally here, Heidler." I reminded him. "Speak up. You're the leader here, right now, you must stand tall. How many times have I told you this before?"

"Right…but, uh...what do you mean by 'European Brotherhood'?"

The groundwork for the European Union. I wanted to say. But in this political environment, such a concept would be utterly unthinkable for everyone involved. However, it is necessary to prevent any future conflict in Europe and to put an end to the atrocities emerging from the growing chaos. They won't understand until they see it in action. When they see it, they will appreciate why the European Union exists.

A kind, collaborative peace that Asia could never experience in a thousand years.

"An end to the cycle of revenge," I told him. "I intend to put an end to war before war puts an end to all of us. To prevent the next Great War."

Heidler smiled. The kindest, most genuine smile I have ever encountered so far. It was terrifying to see such naked optimism and appreciation; like dancing in the garden with knowledge of no snakes or parasites lurking around. I don't think even my own father smiled like that.

"If I have a daughter, I wish she would be just as kind and strong as you," he remarked warmly.

"Spare her that burden," I replied quickly. "You do not want her to end up like me."

"Why?"

Is it really possible for a grown man to be that innocent? Especially Heidler of all people?! What is his story?!

"Because I have seen things you would not believe," I answered firmly. "Don't let her aspire to become like me. It will break her."

Perhaps I was being too cruel in crushing a father's dream but it's the truth. Knowing what men like Theoneu thought of me, it would be a blessing if his daughter and her future descendants lived in obscurity.

I grabbed my two suitcases and walked down the stairs to see Ruth talking with her father. From the red cheeks and tears flowing down her eyes, it must have been another tense argument. Heilder immediately moved to comfort his wife, wiping her tears away with his rough hands, as I moved to look at the old Judean man.

He looked brooding, deathly so, and undeterred from his mission to leave for the Francois Republic before traveling to the Unified States. He wanted Ruth to leave with him. I can't fault a father for trying to keep his only daughter safe from harm, especially when her husband is about to embark on a very irrational and extremely dangerous endeavor.

"I don't blame you for wanting to leave," I replied once I had finished listening to his side of the story. "Some would call you a coward, but leaving Osterry will be the smartest decision you ever made. But let her choose to stay."

"WHAT-"

"We can still fix this. It is not too late to change - to stop - this…stupidity that is occurring around us. We can still save Osterry and Germania."

"I-I see…" Ruth's father mumbled quietly. "Can you…promise to keep her safe?"

"N-," I tried to say before Herr Heidler shoved his way in to embrace the old man.

"You doubt me so much, father." He smiled, attempting to lighten the mood. "I'm a veteran of Ionzo. I know my way around a skirmish or two. I didn't get my Iron Cross for sporting the best mustache in Illdoa!"

His teary-eyed wife gave a small laugh before eventually moving to embrace the two greatest men in her life. 'Greatest' - heh, if only you knew how deified you were in my previous life, Heidler.

As much as I want to continue conversing, there is work that must be done. Each newspaper that came every morning brought news more ill than the last. What happened to the letters I have sent to Berning? Surely his hatred of me cannot be greater than the political upheaval engulfing the republic. I had even made it clear to Weiss that he was to support the Progressive Coalition in any way possible.

This was all so…frustrating. Exhausting even.

After leaving the house, I dragged my feet to take me to one last public to garner the last few morsels of public support. With the Heidlers not too far behind, we finally arrived at the rally set within the grand halls of a local opera house. Upon seeing how the establishment was packed to the brim with earnest supporters of every class and background, I paused to wonder just how brazen we had become.

This is still Wien. The heart of Osterry and the center of Dollfuss's power. Where are his men? Even if the communists were marching on the presidential palace right now, I am absolutely sure that my presence alone would warrant a greater threat. Heidler and Hessen-Buhler did a terrible job of downplaying my importance in the coming revolution.

But to see the audience undisturbed and, dare I say, rather jovial with one another despite some being complicit in the Osterrian November Boycott, made me consider how truly strong the Ostnationalists were. Even Alfred, despite volunteering himself as local security, was extremely relaxed and jovial.

"No one is stopping us," I spoke aloud, trying to spy a face that wasn't smiling or laughing in my presence. "Why is that?"

"That's good, right?" Heidler replied, already shaking hands with his fellow Ostzentrum party hacks. I suppose Miklann is old news given how they address him with greater respect and adoration than before.

I snickered under my breath. You know the ruling government has failed completely when even the moderates take up arms in open revolt.

Where are the fence-sitters? My speech was vaguely written not just for the militarists, but for them as well! This is an echo chamber. Curse you, Being X! You're making me want to stay and reign in the worst excesses of an abused population seeking recompense.

"Miss Argent Silver! Miss Argent Silver!"

A strange female voice emerged from the crowd. The way she spoke Germanian indicated that she was not native Osterrian - the stereotype that Osterrians were low-cultured mountain dwellers persisted after all, almost like Osakans - yet she was not a Germanian national either. An actual foreigner outside Central Europe, I reckon.

"Miss Argent Silver! Behind you!"

I turned around and came face to face with a gorgeous and well-groomed face. Well, as well-groomed as can be in a crowd of rambunctious dissidents.

"My name is Millicent Caldwell!" she introduced herself, her Germanian was suitable enough. "I am a reporter from the Unified States."

Oh dear. I hope the Americans don't get involved now. Not when the tide of revolution is becoming a tsunami.

"You're not here to arrest me?" I gave a crooked smile. For her sake, I hope she wasn't. She'll be torn to shreds and eaten by an angry mob of radicalized, disillusioned citizens.

"No, no, no!" Caldwell smiled back. "I came here to Osterry to write about the November Boycott."

Oh. Right. It's always that. Blood and tragedy sells big in the US.

"And what did you discover?"

"Discovered enough now that you're here. Maybe I could get the real answer from you instead."

"I understand the desire but I have a train-"

"Of course, she can do the interview!" Hessen-Buhler popped into existence, looking over my shoulder as he spoke English with feverish enthusiasm. If I had a bayonet at hand, my instincts would have shoved it through his skull. "But wait until after the rally is done."

"Richard…" I spoke slowly, trying to clue him in on my sudden irritation from his presence.

"You mean after your interview?" Heidler reminded his friend.

My head immediately spun around to face the chef. "What interview?!"

"Ever since you took up our guest room, every night our discussion always comes back to your subordinates not listening to what you have to say." He explained quickly. "I mentioned it to Richard once and he suggested putting all your thoughts in writing."

"I did do that."

"In letters sent to a single politician that may still hate you." Heidler nodded. "Not in a book where everyone can read it."

"I like that idea!" Caldwell's eyes erupted in enthusiasm before reaching out to Hessen-Buhler. "We can work together and co-author this book!"

"Hold on-" I protested but I could tell it was already too late.

"That's a great idea!" Heidler's friend bounced on his feet like a child seeing his favorite toy. "We can do it right after the rally."

Curse you, Being X!

"Do I get a say in this?" I spoke in a controlled tone.

"Of course you do!" Heidler patted my head like I was some lost puppy. "You will dictate what this interview will be about."

"Heidler, my train is-"

"Shit! You're supposed to be on the stage right now!" Hessen-Buhler looked at his pocket watch before grabbing me by the arm and dragging me further inside the opera house.

What a lovely contrast to see…the uncouth and the miserable inhabiting the halls built in neo-Renaissance style. Halls of golden light cast dark shadows over the crowds. The silence was consumed by roaring chants of left-wing, right-wing, radical, and centrist slogans. Each voice trying to drown out the other in a wretched competition over who can make teh loudest din.

If language was inherently violent, then Pan-Germanics were the most violent interest group of them all.

Well, I might as well give them a show…

Keep it together-you're here to placate the militarists first. They're watching you…they have agents hidden among the crowd. Just say enough to keep them relaxed and loyal. Agitating the masses for a revolution is just a luxury.

I have the support. I just need insurance.

Keep it vague. Keep it simple. Keep it violent.

"Today we stand on the precipice of the abyss!"

I paused when I realized what I just said. I looked down on my script. Hold on, did I really write this? It sounds so strange to say it out loud. Heidler would have told me about any changes he would have made but he is not the natural orator, unlike his alternate self. Snap out of it, Tanya. This is no time to express any doubt.

I have no choice but to move forward.

The crowd, however, loved it. The people didn't look human anymore, just a stampede of hate, a hurricane of sorrow, and an avalanche of revanchism. So many wrongs that needed correction."

"Today we stand on the precipice of the abyss," I repeated for emphasis, "And under my leadership, we will take a leap of faith! For too long, we have been pushed into the future, moved by forces beyond our control, to a destination that few could predict. The first step

towards unity is taking control of our own destiny! Take back your lives! Take back your freedom! Take back OUR country!"

If I don't manipulate their anger and scorn…someone else will. And he'll certainly use them against me.

If I knew this was to be the result of my war service…would I have joined the army? In a militarized nation-state built around the pillars of sacrifice and duty, how else am I to drag myself out of childhood poverty?

I quickly glanced over to Heidler, who stood quietly at my side. He seemed…so contemplative. The roaring applause, the overwhelming approval, being the center of the world…I worried he would grow addicted to the feeling.

As would I.

I just wanted a nice quiet life in luxury. I just wanted to be safe and secure.

I spoke a little while longer to prepare for Heidler's entrance. A routine we have done a dozen times by now.

I hyped the audience, sprinkled a little pro-Imperial rhetoric and revanchist catch-phrases to satisfy Theoneau's demands - nothing too hypocritical - but with every word spoken, the more I wondered how I could explain my current situation with Berning and Schlage. Would they even accept me? What will I do next if they won't?

"That was an amazing speech." Frau Caldwell came up to me almost immediately when I departed early from the stage. Unlike Viktoriya, her joy could not infect me. My derision must have shown on my face when Caldwell shifted uneasily on her feet.

How did she manage to get past Alfred?

Regardless, it was important to leave Heidler behind so he had the responsibility to lead the revolution; I had to maintain the current relationship. I cannot afford to incriminate myself any further when word inevitably reaches Berun.

"Umm…do you still allow for the interview?" she asked sheepishly.

"As long as I keep the royalties when it inevitably gets published."

"DEAL!" Hessen-Buhler poked his head out of the doorway to give me a thumbs-up. "WE CAN DO IT AT HIS HOUSE!"

"His?" The American asked, looking confused.

"Herr Heidler's…I reside in their guest room." I answered, "Let's go."

"You're really forthcoming…" she remarked, causing me to look down and see that my hand had latched onto hers. "But I still want to hear Heidler's speech first." She pulled out her journal for emphasis.

"I'll wait outside…"

Of course, leaving is rarely a simple affair. There were a few outliers that tried to grab my attention, requesting autographs, a few handshakes, and a couple of questions. Some civilians, but many more were small-time reporters from news outlets either local or from Czech-Slovak, Magyraozag, and even from Germania.

Thankfully, Heidler's oratory skills have improved enough to be an attractive force in its own right. He plays up his humble origins as a baker and an artist victimized by Dollfuss's tyranny like any true demagogue. I would say I am a proud teacher but knowing what became of my acolytes gives an extremely sour feeling in my stomach. Not to say that Heidler will be like Serebryakov…

Stop it.

Stop thinking about her.

She is gone.

She needed to be gone.

The Devil of the Rhine was known for many things in the Francois Republic and the Unified States. She was a whore, a demon of war, a living weapon, and the greatest visionary of her era. Her essays, when they were finally seized and translated into Francois and Albish, shook the conservative establishment to the core. How a little girl, barely prepubescent at the time of her writing, understood the intricacies of trains, roads, and the general movement of soldiers, material, and vehicles better than even most Field Marshals was utterly incomprehensible.

Why, given how quickly Degurechaff's essays were immediately implemented in the officer curriculum in West Point and Norwich, there were rumors that President Hoovy was going to hire the Devil as an instructor to rebuild the US Army from the ground up. As for Francia, half the country wanted Degurechaff hanged while the other half wanted to kiss her on the lips for putting into words what every forward-minded junior officer was screaming about during the war.

Even a blind man could see the envy simmering underneath the layer of hatred and fear among the Albish elite. For a young commander to be given full autonomy over her unit and allowed to experiment with new ideas and tactics, now that was a position many Albish officers would kill for if it meant a chance to end the Great War sooner.

But here, in Wien, Milicent Caldwell saw another aspect of the Devil that her opponents continued to underestimate; her ability to elevate her fanatics into icons of adoration. From what she gathered by questioning Ostcentrists, Judean neighbors, and army veterans, Heidler was a nobody, a statistic, and seemingly the least qualified person to lead a popular uprising. By all rights, this trench runner had never gotten an opportunity in his life to speak to an audience that was beyond his immediate household.

Until now, that is…

As Caldwell watched him, one among hundreds if not thousands of spectators, the fear of Dollfuss's stormtroopers faded from her mind. He spoke with great passion and terrifying vigor, like a man possessed with the voice of God, that even if the walls were shattered like glass against hammers and the President's men were revealed bearing machine guns and rifles, Caldwell felt immovable, insurmountable, with only her two hands and notebook as weapons.

The Treaty of Triano was doomed for failure. It was dead the moment the Devil on the Rhine evaded capture and imprisonment. So long as she remains free, there will be no shortage of her disciples taking up arms to avenge the calamity that fell the Empire. So long as the people worship the Argent Silver as their savior, their revanchism will surely torment them for all of eternity.

The most terrifying thing is…the people welcomed it. They embraced it.

The Devil's men were in Hell.

And they already conquered it.

With Degurechaff at the helm, why would they be scared of damnation when Heaven itself could be breached with bullets and artillery shells?

A loud thud and a sharp cry knocked Caldwell out of her thoughts. Heidler was no longer on the stage. Was he shot?

The American journalist, like most of the spectators, leaned forward to catch a glimpse of what became the speaker. The crowd let out a huge sigh of relief when the upstart revolutionary dusted himself off the ground with the help of the front-row attendants. Heidler, that silly artist, walked too close to the edge of the stage during his monologue, and promptly fell off, performing a spontaneous spectacular faceplant.

To save face, Heidler, dazed from the fall, immediately did a few around of handshakes with the nearest attendants but before he could walk back onto the stage, the whole room was engulfed in light. The thunderous laughter was quickly replaced with terror and stampeding crowds. Caldwell's vision was engulfed in a flash of red and black and she was forced to look away.

Like a miracle of the Old Testament, the stage exploded into a geyser of splinters and flame, knocking the people closest to it right off their feet. Heidler, like the Great War veterans, immediately dove behind cover behind chairs with hands or newspapers over their heads.

As soon as the dust settled, there was naught but the echoing pandemonium outside the walls of the theatre. Many wasted no time evacuating the area, desperate to save their own lives.

Those that chose to remain inside, Caldwell was guilty of not fleeing, peeked their heads to glare at the small crater where the podium used to be. Many veterans laughed when they realized how small the explosive was; it brought back old memories in the trench.

But the peace proved to be false.

"Herr Heidler!" she heard the Devil scream in panic.

There would not be another word as a second bomb, hidden underneath the stage itself, detonated. Once again, Caldwell's vision was drowned in a hail of fire, debris, and smoke. The earth trembled, the winds howled, and screaming grew ever more distant.

No.

This is no place for death.

Pray.

Pray for salvation.

If I live, Caldwell thought to herself as trinkets of glass shards and burnt curtains washed over her hair as she ran for the nearest exit, I am getting that interview…

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400 years of culture, history, and talent went up in smoke. Whoever set up the charges, as I had no shortage of enemies and ideological competitors, saw the violent death of an old relic as a worthy price of my vanquishment. I felt rough, calloused hands brush against the back of my neck before gripping my collar and pulling me back. The building trembled around my ears as the walls creaked and groaned; I squinted up and saw the ceiling on the verge of collapsing with deep, violent scars cracking through the Baroque murals.

Was there a third bomb on the roof?

"Let me go!" I shouted at my benefactor as my nails scratched against his skin. "Let me go! I need to find Heidler!"

I did not give you permission to die yet! I still need you to lead this revolution. Damn you, Being X! He was to be my scapegoat for the Progressives in Berun!

Damn it! Where is he?!

I was finally let go when the sun blinded me. When I recovered my bearings, I saw that Heidler's captain had retrieved me. He gave me a respectful nod before running into the opera house to search for more survivors.

"Tanya!" I heard that familiar but cursed voice reaching my ears. "Oh good, you're still alive. They'll need a lot of bombs next time."

It was Heidler, covered in soot and debris, a look that reminded me of the trenches in Rhineland. A sentiment that we both seemed to share.

"I suppose the bad news is that we will have to start the revolution early." he chuckled weakly. "It pains me to say…but we have to take advantage of this."

"But my trip to Yugoslavia-"

"Yugoslavia isn't going nowhere - well, it will go everywhere the way it is heading, I mean - but this is our chance to triumph early."

"The interview-"

"We can make it up as we go along." He said quickly, grabbing me by the hand and pulling me to stand on top of a car with him. "We have to show the people that you are still alive. We cannot lose hope now."

"Heidler-"

"I may not know what our future entails with you, Argent Silver, but I do know what I don't want. Our country needs you. We all do." Heidler remarked before turning to the crowd to whip up another spew of words belonging to the nonsensical sputtering of a deranged madman. He was full of violence and fury; more of a wounded beast than a man.

Curse you, Being X…at least Visha would have listened to what I wanted to say first.

Check out Part 2 of my Anniversary post if you haven't!

Chapter Twenty-Five: A Private Marriage Arrangement

If someone were to tell Matheus Johan Weiss back in 1924 that within 10 years, not only would he have partaken in the largest and most destructive conflict in human history, serving in the most distinguished aerial mage battalion in Imperial history under the greatest mage commander of its generation, but his wartime service would launch his political career to such heights as to be granted regular audience with the venerable elders of the Empire, he would have jumped with glee.

In 1924, Weiss hoped that the war would end by Christmas so he could return home with an Iron Cross.

A naive sentiment. If only Weiss could go back and tell his juvenile self the price for such honor and glory.

By 1932, Weiss hoped there was a home to return to.

He buried his siblings.

He buried his grandparents.

He buried his country.

His family held artifacts and stories centuries old, his lineage could be traced back to Charlemagne himself, but none of it mattered. Washed away in a tide of apathetic modernity and the unrelenting march of Tomorrow. Everywhere he looked were constant reminders of his greatest failure as a soldier and knight of the Empire. There was nothing to look forward to in life knowing what he had lost.

Was it wrong to say he enjoyed the Great War? Perils and all? At least back then, he had something worth fighting for.

Weiss was tired of the Weimar Republic.

Weiss was sick of it.

Tired of communists, socialists, radicals, betrayals, conspiracies, politicking…even Judeans. All they do is complain. All they ever want to do is leave. Leave to the Francois Republic…to the Unified States…the countries that trianofied the Empire and murdered his family…Did they not love this country like him? They were supposed to be his brothers and sisters defending what remained of the old order.

Oh, what Weiss wouldn't give just to have Tanya return to Germania to enact some "discipline" among the Judean militias. Heh. Oh, Tanya… He loved her. He loved his commander. If only

she could just…focus on them instead. Her unit, the 203rd, instead of these bureaucratic parasites that call themselves "Progressives."

The only thing this country is progressing towards is oblivion. Inflation is getting out of control and no one seems to know where the money is going. It is nothing short of a miracle that Germania scrapped enough cash to fill out its first reparation payment to the victorious Allies. Treachery. Treachery and stupidity were everywhere. The Reichstag is rife with it.

Everything could have been resolved by now if the government kept Tanya within reach instead of casting her out like a leper. The Argent Silver just needs to give him the word and he will descend upon these worthless vermin like a dragon roasting rats.

"Heil Degurechaff." Weiss greeted, stretching out his right arm in a perfect 45-degree angle. A gesture practiced a thousand times in Hamburg and will be practiced a thousand times more in Brandenburg and Silesia now that the KSA has been recalled. He was initially apprehensive at the action when Tanya made her displeasure known but ever since then, it only felt more right to do it.

As Elena put it so nicely, like the revolutionaries who took the Tennis Court Oath, unity is paramount to ensuring Tanya's success.

Hans von Zettour, however, looked thoroughly unimpressed by the bold display. His mood only lightened somewhat when Weiss quickly adjusted his stance to a more traditional, military greeting. Right, Zettour did not like Elena. Given that this meeting was private, his displeasure against the "racially confused upstart" was more pronounced. Weiss caught himself before he could laugh at another Judenvolk joke. Flashes of Tanya's unflinching gaze erupted in his mind and he forced himself to stay consummate.

One bottle of the strongest champagne in Zettour's storage said otherwise.

"In Hamburg, I asked a Judean whore why she idolized the Argent Silver." Weiss slurred his words, as he reclined on the comfiest chair in Berun. "She said that it's because she is brave, beautiful, and glorious. I told her we all aspire to be someone we're not."

"She charged you extra for that, didn't she?" Zettour chuckled.

"She did, not too surprising…" the veteran mage laughed at his own joke, reaching over for another bottle, "I half expected that she would reject me outright; I didn't have my cock clipped after all. Konig once told me that Judean women won't touch anything that wasn't at least 10% off."

"How well did these Judeans perform in the KSA?" the Junker inquired dryly.

"Remarkably well." Weiss paused for a moment. "Up until the executions happened."

As it turns out, Judeans were easily disturbed whenever one of their own was set before a noose; conserving bullets was the priority now that shipments from the Czech-Slovak State seldom arrive. Of course, they insisted that everyone should have a fair trial before a judge, even if the Judean accused was, in fact, a Bolshevik rabble-rouser or colluded with the communist traitors. In his eyes, however, no insult against Germania's honor was too small. When Weiss sent word to Elena about morale issues among the Judean members, she "gently" reminded them that the purpose of the KSA was to deliver the Argent Silver's judgment onto the faithless.

The system that she established to "placate" their concerns was simple: the trial was to be done at night, inside empty warehouses or rooms, whereas the "jury" was handpicked by Elena - all rabid anti-communists - while the prosecutor was appointed by Weiss, while the accused had a defense counsel from the KSA. There was no civilian audience present, no pesky reporters, nor the burden of proof required.

As Executioner Elena explained it so eloquently, the purpose wasn't to find the communist traitors guilty of treason, it was to deny them a chance to reclaim their innocence. Communist or Judean, National Vanguardist or Socialist, it didn't matter anymore. Each night ended when the accused was found hanging under a street post before the rising sun.

"But morale eventually improved." Weiss laughed quietly, skipping the ceremony of pouring the wine into a glass and instead drinking straight from the bottle. "It was a good thing too. We had run out of rope."

Many Judeans in the KSA deserted. Some left for greener pastures in the Unified States. That was fine for Weiss for all he cared. They weren't true soldiers anyway. Not real patriots like him, Neumann, and Konig. But for the few Judeans that stayed, their undying faith and loyalty to Germania will be rewarded, he vowed to make it happen. They will have entire monuments built in their honor.

The way Weiss saw it. Their method of murder was mercy. If they were caught by Der Stahlhelm, well, Duester boasted how he discovered 100 ways to skin a Judean. But that was a small threat compared to how the Argent Silver would react to the whiff of cowardice and treason.

"Fascinating," Zettour grumbled, seemingly undisturbed by the news, "But moving on to more important news. When have you last heard of Degurechaff?"

"That she was dancing in Wien to overthrow that traitor Dollfuss…"

"And experienced another assassination attempt on her life."

Weiss's eyes shot up immediately. The clouded feelings were shot out of his mind like a bullet upon hearing those foreboding words.

"I need to get to Wien," he stated grimly. "I need to contact Elena. We need to send a KSA squad to Osterry to protect her-"

"Peace, Herr Weiss." Zettour gestured for him to sit back down. "She is alive and unspoiled but her enemies are still at large."

"All the more reason to-"

"Weiss." The junker glared the veteran into polite restraint. "I did not call you here to watch you babble. You are a soldier, the defender of Germania's liberty, and the finest mage of our time."

"Funny, everyone says that. It's a fine opinion to have…" Weiss laughed. He was a prideful man, as strong as any other scion, but to claim superiority for the Argent Silver? That is a duel he can live without.

"It's not an opinion. It's a FACT."

The harshness in the words indicated total finality and forced the veteran mage to observe the old general in a new light. A brief silence existed between the two men; nothing in the estate threatened to disturb Zettour's will. Weiss tried his hardest not to look foolish before the former despot but his body betrayed his inner discomfort.

"Germania is in danger of becoming another footnote in history. The Argent Silver is our greatest legacy as a people and we would be damned to not see it continued. She is indomitable, yes, the best soldier any Kaiser could ask for, but she is still a woman and has yet to fulfill her final obligation to the nation." Zettour declared as if he were the sovereign of the Empire. In a way, perhaps he still is. "What happened in Wien proves how further mingling with the unrighteous riffraff is putting our lives, our nation, into jeopardy. I cannot stand how she is willing to surround herself with such pitiful creatures."

"That is very hilarious, Zettour. Will Degurechaff even obey?"

"She will do her final duty to the Empire as a wife and mother of mages." The Junker's eyes turned dark upon hearing such a preposterous inquiry. "As will you."

At first, Weiss' face was immutable - frozen in a dumbfounded expression - before slowly distorting in utter disbelief. He heard many ridiculous and foul remarks throughout his life ever since he joined the Imperial Army but this was far beyond what he could have even remotely imagined. Bewilderment, fear, and excitement crashed against each other like two armies charging across No Man's Land. Never would he have considered himself the primary candidate for such a spectacular arrangement.

"Degurechaff is young, virgin, fertile, and must breed out an heir. So long as our enemies persist in bringing further ruination to the Empire, we must maintain our mage superiority."

"Yes…" Weiss agreed, his words left his mouth at a snail's pace. It was a simple calculation: Germania needs stronger mages in large quantities. One Argent Silver was enough to withstand the Allied onslaught. But with two? Six? A platoon of Argent Silvers? The Empire would never have fallen after the Great War. "But…"

"But what?" Zettour demanded.

"Would she like me? As a husband?"

Kyrieleis! That sounded so unnatural.

It was a silly question but it needed to be said. Weiss respected Degurechaff and she valued him in return. That was the simple reality but it was also a matter of hierarchy. Even in his most lecherous thoughts, the KSA mage could not imagine her in civilian clothing, much less naked; her uniform was her skin. Nor could he imagine himself as the patriarch of this relationship. She would dominate every discussion, every encounter, and every argument as she did in the war room. How can Weiss be the man of the house when the Argent Silver demonstrated superior leadership and authority?

Granted, he personally wouldn't be opposed to this hierarchy. After all, brutal she may be but the Major always did him and the 203rd right. Her integrity is impeachable, her honor secured, and her virtue heaven-sent. Weiss would at least go to work every morning and come home every night knowing that he would not be cuckold by another man.

Of course, what would Neumann and Konig say? What would the rest of the 203rd say? What would the people of Germania say? That this renowned officer was being led around like a horse drawing carts by a woman half his size? His proud masculinity refused to have him live in such a reality.

He is Matheus Johan Weiss, by God, groomed to continue the family legacy as a gentleman and officer! Not some brow-beaten manservant.

"Do you intend on abusing Degurechaff?" Zettour retorted, "Her happiness and joy as a spouse is none of my concern nor should it be yours. She is the strongest mage of our time and you, by all accounts, are the best candidate to marry her. Only through strong genes and strict regime can we ensure future mages of her aptitude."

"Very good arguments but there's a problem." Weiss countered with a crooked smile.

"And, what, pray, is that?"

"I'm already engaged. My marriage has been planned for the near future! I cannot do this!" Weiss protested. "It is an affront to tradition and God and-"

"Kaiser Charlemagne had six wives at once during his reign. Do you really believe that your apprehension towards a minor breach in monogamic tradition is greater than the complete obliviation of the Germanic people?" Zettour spoke with utter disdain for Weiss' hesitation. "If it displeases you so much, then I suggest that you get married, put a child in Degurchaff, walk away, and return to your betrothed. There is no shortage of Papalist priests willing to bend the rules to annul the marriage without inflicting the stain of divorce upon either party."

"I…well…"

"Do you know how many lesser men would have jumped at the chance to claim Degurechaff as their own? Much less have the opportunity to claim ownership of two wives? With this marriage, we can finally put an end to the disgusting rumors about her."

Rumors? Right, those rumors. Weiss suddenly remembered that he shot a drunk man with his Luger for spouting such filth during his time in Hamburg. In hindsight, he should have fired at his feet or broken one of his arms.

"Just one child?"

"I expect more than two."

"More than two?!"

"At least three. As many as you can give us."

"I should…consult with my fiance about this."

"Why does her voice matter here?"

"She deserves to know at least."

"And risk allowing the downfall of our civilization due to the whims of one minor objection?"

"I will make the final decision." Weiss promised, "But she must know first."

"I understand-" Zettour began.

"May I say one word more? Does Degurechaff know?"

This marriage will be the most important decision of their lives. The sooner she is told, the better.

"Yes." Zettour answered, "I have sent a letter to Wien in which I request that you tell Elena to cease any potential interception of my packages."

Heh. Weiss laughed internally to see the Junker's face sour when the name left his mouth.

"Would the children know? Our children?" The young man questioned. "The nature of their birth?"

"No more than what is necessary."

"Will I be the one to raise them?"

"Do you want to?"

"They need a father figure in their lives," Weiss remarked. As great as Tanya was, she was still just one woman. "So, obviously, I would want to be there for my children."

For the first time since arriving, Weiss saw Zettour smile, though small, it was nonetheless proud and expectant. A small victory for the guest for making his host enjoy the small talk.

"Weiss," the Junker began, "How do you feel about becoming the Kaiser?"

The young veteran immediately laughed his heart out. It was such a ridiculous concept that he had to drown out his tears with another glass of champagne and wine. To ascend to such a prestigious position in society was beyond any of his wildest dreams. Weiss merely wanted to go down in history as one of the finest soldiers to have ever lived. To retire with full honors and a chest decorated with medals of every shape and color.

But to become the new sovereign and overturn centuries of established lineages was a preposterous thought and yet…and yet, Weiss did promise to make Degurechaff his Kaiserin. They could rule together. A holy union seemingly ripped out of the pages of a fairy tale. Together, they can save the Empire. Save Germania.

Together, they could conquer Europe and make it their own backyard. From Olissipo and Moskova, they could make the entire continent bow to their feet and worship them. But more objectively though, given the sheer disparity between the two sexes, Weiss could only ensure that his consort would be the one whose hegemony is absolute.

Unfortunately for these grand ambitions awakened inside of the veteran mage, honor still triumphed.

"Where does my fiance fit in these schemes? Where does my Wilhelmina exist in this royal court?" Weiss demanded. If he becomes Kaiser and Degurechaff becomes Kaiserin, where does that leave her? A mistress? A concubine? She was his original bride! Surely, she deserves a share of the glory?

"She will be whatever you want her to be," Zettour grumbled. "Though we have greater concerns to worry about."

"And what would that be? This is my betrothed! This is a great concern for me."

"Elena."

It is always Elena. Though, Weiss can't argue with that sentiment.

His fiance may kill him in a heated argument; Elena would slice him into tiny pieces and throw them into the Oder River. To say that he chaffs under her leadership, as she is the one who proposed and laid the groundwork of the KSA, would not be entirely inaccurate. Like Degurechaff, Weiss did respect her authority given how their goals of a strong and united Empire align with one another.

They agreed on many things but disagreed on many more. Namely, the role of the KSA once the Argent Silver takes the throne. Is it a party? A civilian organization? A paramilitary force of thugs? Or perhaps, more radically, an entirely new army to replace the decadent and lame Junkers that still cling to every last scrap of relevancy. Elena said that nothing fundamental would change if Tanya chose to allow men like Zettour and Rudensdorf to exist as they are: relics of an old world that killed itself in the pursuit of eternal vainglory.

In Elena's eyes, the KSA - in blunt terms - was to be the new army; a new army for a new world that has no place for obsolete traditions with Degurechaff as its immortal commander. An army where new blood like Heydryck can rise above their previous station and become something more…Obviously, its existence was criminal under the current regime and thus must remain secret. The ranks were only opened to those who swore personal oaths of loyalty to Tanya von Degurechaff with Weiss as her primary bannerman. Unconditional obedience was the only prerequisite for entry.

He may not be a schemer but he knew what Zettour wanted from him. The old general was terrified of his former agent, terrified of her raw intelligence; any blind man could see though the mage was polite enough not to say it to his face.

From plotting to marry one superior to killing the other, Weiss really wondered which side he was on. He was a soldier, not an assassin, and yet here Zettour was, requesting him to betray a key ally and disband her ambitions within Degurechaff's movement.

Weiss suddenly remembered an adage floating around in the War Academy during his time: where there are Judeans, there are plagues. Was that who they were referring to? Elena? Listening to the Junker laying out his reasons for eliminating the most valued member of Degurechaff's war party with a dagger to the spine made him wish Argent Silver was present in the room.

Perhaps, it was not a physical illness but a sickness of the mind and soul. The way the former despot spoke of his former executioner made it seem that Elena was one of the Four Horsemen of Revelation. But she was only half-Judean.

She didn't look Judean. She didn't sound Judean. She didn't do anything remotely Judean. The way Weiss saw it, she was as Germanian as any other. And although her proposals on how Germania and the Empire should be run were…certainly radical. But can he fault her? Seeing the effects of a Degurechaff-less government made him and everyone he knew sympathetic to the idea of reenacting the Francois Revolution. What would his ancestors say?

Heh...a little revolution never hurt anyone, right?

But since when does the Argent Silver do "little" endeavors?

This ignores the big question of having to explain his reasoning for removing Elena from the political equation to Tanya. Zettour assures that he will smooth things over with her but Weiss felt a strong impulse to openly question his judgement. Tanya's patience is limited for such contrivances, unlike her wrath.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Indoctrination

When news broke out of a bombing in Wien, it reopened old conspiracies once laid to rest and gave birth to new ones. Many blamed the Francois, others blamed the communists, and few considered the Judeans guilty, but Viktoriya…Viktoriya just wished she was there in Osterry with Tanya. When everyone can be considered Degurechaff's enemy, discerning between the innocent and the vermin was a waste of effort. Her protection was all that mattered.

This powerlessness…she hated it.

She despised it with all her heart.

This growing weakness within her was a parasite that she could not decipher. It squeezed her heart and clawed at her brain; her own spirit seemed to wax and wane as if she died every night and woke up reborn again. To be born only to die. Wondering, wandering, where has her life gone after the Great War.

Perhaps that is what happened.

Viktoriya dreaming dreamless dreams of the abyss. Of God.

The first time she heard the latest news from Wien, she could not stop crying. Her tears could flood oceans as easily as they flooded the paper. It wasn't scorn that awoke within the White Russy, at first, much to her own confusion, but regret. It was bitter, lukewarm like cold saltwater poured across her body. The more she tried to rage against the headlines, the colder the feeling was.

Her parents could not understand her, no matter how they approached the assassination plot. Her brothers were no better; she loved them all as a daughter and a sister should, but Viktoriya wondered if they would ever love her back.

Holy Rus does not believe in tears. Mercy was a weakness, a luxury that could not be afforded in such turbulent times. Kill the traitor. Burn the heretic. Raze their temples. All that is wanted from her, all that is expected from her, is death.

It is a glorious duty, a holy duty, to defend Christendom from the blasphemers and the Judenvolk. Honor was loyalty and loyalty was death. Viktoriya wasn't afraid to die, wasn't she? Why be afraid of all the mortal perils that plague the physical world when her very soul was secure in eternal paradise? Why be concerned with the opinions of lesser beings when her own piety is without doubt?

But Degurechaff was not a lesser being. She was greater than any human being Viktoriya had ever known. She was more than a mere mortal; she was a god. A Saint.

Saints don't make mistakes.

For Degurechaff to show anger against her…to deliver a harsh verdict…

But, Viktoriya did everything right…Father Gregori said so. Her father said so. Heh, he had even praised her for once. That was a wonderful feeling.

What was her destiny?

"HEY!" Anatolii's voice pierced through the storm inside her mind; his Germanian was better than most Germanians. But it was not directed at her. Her older brother glared at an old man and his granddaughter as if they were the most despicable beings alive. "You two."

Her brothers, Anatolii and Kolya, looked good in the KSA uniform and, thanks to advanced facial reconstruction, the eldest brother - Anatolii - wore a prosthetic nose that made his face somewhat more approachable. They had only joined recently and, thanks to their ties with her, rose through the ranks to lead their own Russy squads. Thank God they were able commanders in their own right.

Nepotism is not always a dirty word.

"Come here." He politely beckoned the pair to come closer. The fear was palpable in the young girl's face, one that invoked both pity and wrath within Viktoriya's soul, while the grandfather mustered up all the courage he had in himself.

They were like lambs being dragged into a slaughterhouse.

"Are you Judeans?" Anatolii asked calmly as if he sought directions.

"No." The teen girl shook her head violently.

"Yes." The old man answered with a dull hint of defiance. The lack of fear in his eyes irked her brothers to no end. "We are."

Viktoriya immediately spotted a dull medal pinned to the old man's chest, clearly worn down from time, and discerned that the old man was a veteran of the Franco-Preussian War. He was there when the Empire was united all those decades ago.

Sensing violence, the rest of the pedestrians walked across the street and onto another sidewalk, as though there was an invisible wall separating the civilians from the White Russites. Out of the corner of her eye, Viktoriya spotted a few armed men, Judeans most likely, contemplating pulling out their handguns but ultimately staying their hands.

Those militiamen weren't stupid: attacking Degurechaff's loyalists was a death warrant. No one wanted to give further ammunition to the rumormongers and slanderers. Not when the Argent Silver was attacked in Wien so recently.

"Why haven't you greeted us?" Anatolii inquired, in a tone that suggested anything but passing politeness. Somehow, he looked more uncanny with a fake nose than without one.

"Ah," The old man laughed awkwardly, taking off his hat to perform a shallow but noble bow. That earned him a sharp blow to the cheek from the eldest brother. The punch knocked the elderly veteran onto the nearby brick wall with blood leaking from his mouth. He would have collapsed entirely from Anatolii's strength if it weren't for his granddaughter grabbing onto him and helping him recover.

"I'm giving you one more chance." Anatolii threatened to smile, "Greet us. Properly."

"Heil-heil Degurechaff." the old man gurgled, weakly raising his right arm in salute yet his eyes seemed only to shine brighter.

"So you do know…" Anatolii grumbled, no longer finding this encounter playful. "Practice."

All three Serebryakovs immediately turned their gaze onto the young girl who immediately greeted them with greater energy. The brothers were content and ready to depart but Viktoriya was not yet done.

"How old are you?" She asked in a plain voice to the girl.

"My name is-"

"I don't care about your name. How old are you?"

"Fifth-fifthteen."

"Why haven't you joined the Kaiserliche Sicherheitsabteilung?" Viktoriya growled, her voice growing more and more resentful with each passing second. Whatever pity remained evaporated under the burning wrath bellowing inside.

"I-"

"Do you hate your country?"

"I-"

"Do you hate…the Argent Silver?"

"No-"

"Do you hate us?"

"I-I…"

"Who's side are you on?"

"No one's." The elder Judean butted in, "We only want peace."

"Why haven't you joined us?" Viktoriya asked the teen again, ignoring the grandfather entirely. "Your country needs you. Germania needs you."

Don't you want to save the Empire?

Don't you want to make the Argent Silver happy?

Don't you know what happens if you refuse?

"What…will I do?"

"Fight. Take back your country." Viktoriya smiled like a tiger spotting its prey. "Don't you want to save your nation?"

You will fight.

You will bleed.

You will not stop when your bones break and your skin is torn.

You will train harder than the enemy set out to destroy you.

You will get all the rest you need in the grave.

"I expect to see your face in the KSA next week at 14:00. Don't be late." The veteran mage spoke softly. "I know where you live."

A white lie. Elena would take care of her. It will be her women knocking on their door to drag this trembling, tearful girl away.

Is this what she looked like in training when Tanya looked at her? A shy, pitiful creature lost in the wide, uncaring world?

How weak.

How pathetic.

Be like Degurechaff and transform this worthless maggot into a proper soldier for God and the Empire. Make the girl a proud warrior just like herself.

And yet.

And yet…

Perhaps, she should have been gentler with her? Viktoriya didn't follow Degurechaff out of fear, it was love. It was honor. It was devotion. It was faith. Could she really fault the girl for hesitating? Not everyone could survive Degurechaff's standards.

She watched as the old man led his granddaughter away from the Serebryakovs and resumed their journey down the street.

"Thank you for your service!" Viktoriya called out to him. Degurechaff would at least acknowledge his duty if she were present. "Don't forget to choose."

To the fence-sitters in Germania, the choice was simple.

They are either for Degurechaff or against her.

For the Empire or against it.

For the movement or against it.

They are to join us or die.

There will not be another Bolshevik Revolution here. Nor ever. God forbid that the communists will carve another degenerate state in Europe.

"Why did you say that?" Anatolii looked at her with estranged bewilderment. "There is nothing to be thankful for from that…thing!"

"Oh, right." Viktoriya bowed her head. Why did she say that? He was the enemy. The parasite. Anyone that was against her, against God, against Degurechaff, was vermin. "I…don't know."

"I still don't understand…Why does the Argent Silver care about these rodents?" Kolya grunted, returning to his native language as the siblings resumed their journey. "What have they ever done for her?"

"She offered them protection, gave them her honor and gratitude, and what do they do in response? They stab her in the back…" Anatolii complained sourly. "They tried to kill her in Konigsberg and they tried to do it in Wien. Do these idiots have any shame? Any remorse?"

"Can they even feel remorse?" Kolya huffed. "What do you think, Visha?"

Hearing her name shook Viktoriya out of her brooding. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"Did the Argent Silver ever tell you why she cares about the Judeans?" Kolya repeated.

"Did she tell you at all?" Anatolii inquired.

Yes. She did.

"No. She didn't." Viktoriya shook her head in defeat.

There are consequences, Visha, for tormenting an entire people.

"She told you nothing?" Her eldest brother was surprised. "Doesn't she tell you everything? You kept saying how much work was thrown upon you."

This is about basic human decency, Visha.

"No." she shook her head again, "Nothing of the sort."

"Wow…" Kolya was dumbstruck.

Don't be hated, Visha, I don't want you to be hated.

"Did you try asking her?" Anatolii asked again.

There is enough misery in the world, Visha.

"No. I didn't want to question her judgment."

Why?

"So why did you get expelled?" Kolya furrowed his brow. "You did everything she expected from you."

You are my burden to resolve.

"Because…" Viktoriya began, "Because…"

"Because what?" her oldest brother leaned over.

"I…dishonored myself before her. I…rose above my own station." Viktoriya answered with great hesitance.

"Dishonored…?" The two brothers looked at each other in mild confusion before the cogs in their minds turned.

"That is what happened that night?!"

"So that is why father disowned you…"

"Don't worry, Visha," Kolya beamed, "There's plenty of men out there for you."

"We'll just have to find them." Anatolii nodded.

"You'll only scare them." Visha protested meekly.

"I'm not scary!" he huffed, "Do I look scary to you, Kolya?"

"Yes. A Judean has a prettier face than you."

"Fuck you!"

While her brothers bickered and bantered, ignoring the passersby, while Viktoriya stewed in her own thoughts. She could not escape Tanya's grip around her neck; her phantom fingers scratching at her skin and tearing at her hair. Why? Why won't she smile upon her? There was supposed to be warmth, joy even, at the thought of seeing Tanya. But there weren't the smiles that invaded her mind, only the cold, cruel, and disappointed frown of the Argent Silver.

Viktoriya was the one who bled for the Empire, just as her brothers had done, what did these people do? WHAT DID THEY DO TO DESERVE HER ATTENTION?! These Judeans, these perfidious financiers, had done nothing but hide under rocks and basements as the Empire starved while she had to go fight the real war against the Allied Powers. She was there. On the frontlines. They were not.

Viktoriya fought alongside Tanya. They did not. So why? She was godly. They were not. She was a patriot for the Empire. They were not.

Why does she care about them more than her? What did they ever do to deserve such…such…kindness?

Did she not deserve it too?

Viktoriya nearly walked into a lamp post, so deep in her own brooding and self-loathing, and it would have caused a scene if it weren't for the cruelty hiding within her brothers that radiated a cold dread towards the onlookers. It was a funny sight in a way. Viktoriya always imagined her triumphant return home, being paraded around in the streets as the heroes and protectors of the Empire, a laurel wreath upon her head while the sky rained rose pedals…with Tanya by her side.

"So…this is the church?" Anatolii grunted as he examined the humble temple. "Is this even a church?"

The exterior was as drab and deprived of iconography as it could be. It was more fitting to label the building as a warehouse; churches are supposed to be grand in scale, outfitted with color, and filled with song. But not this one. And yet, Viktoriya felt an odd comfort in viewing the exterior in its entirety.

"Yes." she nodded, before taking the lead and opening the door for her brothers, much to Anatolii's insistence to be the gentleman.

Inside had the trappings of a Christian church but the hollowness put the men on high alert. In place of artwork, are blackboards filled to the brim with scribbles and calculations as if this establishment has been converted into a private tutoring school. Except the math was too advanced, even for a university student, and the reality they presented intimidated the White Russites.

"Ah, Viktoriya…" a familiar voice echoed across the church, "Just as God declared."

Almost immediately, the men reached for their pistols at the sight of the old man. Even though their sister has explained to them about Father Adelheid, she may not have emphasized enough how heretical he looked. His attire was familiar to their faith but the colors and arrangement were all wrong, making everything look so alien in their eyes.

"Father Adelheid…" Viktoriya murmured, conflicted between performing a traditional greeting and the KSA salute.

"Heil Degurechaff." The mad priest raised his right aim effortlessly. Though his smile was calm and content, his eyes betrayed a hidden ferocity - a raging furnace that belched smoke and burned air. "How may I be of service?"

"So you're the one who found my baby sister?" Anatolii questioned, taking a step forward to meet Schugel.

"I will not deny it." he nodded, "I made sure that death and despair did not take her that night"

"For that, we thank you," Anatolii replied, the two brothers bowing before Schugel in deep gratitude. "You saved her life. I hope she has not made it too difficult for you."

The priest quickly shifted his eyes to glare at Viktoriya, memories of her first few nights in his church flashing like scenes in a movie. Define 'difficult'... He had to get rid of all the knives in the kitchen lest she would use them on herself. Same with the mirrors in the lavatories; in this economy, it cost him a small fortune of his time and effort to clean up and replace all the broken glass on top of having to bandage her bloodied hands. She had tried crafting a noose for herself so he'd hid all the chairs and ladders. She had eaten little and listened even less.

She wanted to die, to leave this wretched earth early, and enter Heaven. And for what? To escape? That is not how soldiers die. Nor do champions.

Thank God, however, that Viktorya still kept her faith in Tanya von Degurechaff. Some would say that it was blasphemous to invoke the Argent Silver in such a manner but what choice did Schugel have? He certainly wasn't going to let a troubled soul become a corpse in his own church. His own lab!

As for helping her recover…well, job stability was limited. Whether because of the economy or her faltering state, Schugel didn't press any further. Not when there was research to be developed.

"None at all." Schugel grinned. "They were difficulties I was glad to partake in."

"Again, thank you, Father." Kolya shook the old man's hand. "We are in your debt."

"Debt! Ha!" The old priest bellowed, "Say…now that you mentioned it, I could use some assistance trying to spread the word among the Eastern Church."

"Do tell," Anatolii hummed, "I suppose our priests could learn a thing or two from you." He pointed to a math equation. "They cannot know that for sure."

"What is it?" Kolya furrowed his brow trying to make sense of the numbers and letters."

"I'll be glad to explain." Father Adelheid, "It's been ages since I entertained guests of my previous line of work. Do you remember when this used to be called 'The New Science'? That equation is the future of physics."

"Anatolii, Kolya," Viktoriya spoke softly at her brothers. It was high time to get on with the real reason why she returned to this church. "Could you both please wait outside for a while? I want a private word with Schugel."

"Whatever for?" Anatolii titled his head, suddenly eyeing her with mild suspicion and curiosity.

"This doesn't concern you…"

"I'm the oldest brother in the family." he snorted, "It's my job to be concerned about you."

"And my job as well!" Kolya nodded.

"Then if you truly believe that you are protecting me," she grumbled deeply, "You will wait outside until my business here is done."

"But -" Anatolii tried to protest sternly.

"You forget." She placed her hand over his chest to force him to stop, "I hold rank over you."

That was…a mixed statement. Technically speaking, to avoid being labeled as a combat group by the federal government, the KSA had to forgo a traditional military hierarchy; as such, the leadership structure was far more fluid and informal. "Strickbreaker" groups formed around local personalities who cut their teeth leading squads or companies in the Great War. However, there was one constant truth: the overall leadership of the KSA was firmly in the hands of Elena Muller as the primary founder of the organization. Given Viktoriya's personal, intimate friendship with Executioner Elena - acting as her right-hand woman - the mage had the privilege to determine promotions and demotions within the organization.

If Viktoriya had to threaten her own blood just for a moment of compliance, so be it.

Thankfully, Anatolii understood the threat and let out an agitated sigh before turning his back and walking towards the exit with Kolya in tow. No doubt that she will be facing a tense dinner at home tonight; abusing her authority against her older brothers will certainly bring in some stern, perhaps violent, words from her father. Family sticks together - family elevates each other - nepotism is not always a dirty word.

Insanity was Loyalty.

Cruelty was Assurity.

Vindictiveness was Honorable.

Hate is Power.

"Tanya, why did you cast me out?" She thought bitterly to herself, "I did everything correctly. Since when did you care about methodology?"

"You did do everything correctly." Father Adelheid hummed, leaning over the brunette. "You did nothing wrong."

"Thank you." she murmured, "I needed to hear that."

"No need to thank me," He chuckled, "It is God's plan at work. But what did you want to speak to me about?"

Viktoriya raised her head to study Schugel's face. She immediately scanned him for any hint of deceit or treachery. An unfair treatment, by the priest's own account, he was a bigger fanatic of the Argent Silver than she could ever be. It was faith in God that ensured his loyalty; she was the messiah. The Chosen One. The fabled Ubermensch. She could trust him. He saved her life.

"Father…" she began, her mouth already disobeying and her voice reluctant to leave her throat. Even her own words felt alien. "Do you know what occurs in the cabarets?"

The priest snickered softly. "I have heard all the stories of debauchery and sin."

"Then, you would know about the men…liking male company?"

He nodded silently but slowly.

"And Waldeburg? And the women who listen to her?"

He nodded again.

"What if I told you…" Viktoriya stopped suddenly, suddenly feeling the urge to run and hide. To hide from the world and everyone in it.

"Take your time. I am not here to judge."

"Father, is there a place for me in heaven?"

If she were confessing to an Orthodox priest, she would have immediately died of shame for asking for the obvious. Of course, there was a place for her in heaven! She earned it by killing Judeo-Bolshevik scum! Father Gregori could not put it in simpler terms: she did holy work killing the faithless and the unrighteous, just like the Argent Silver. She butchered the spineless cosmopolitans, the godless communists, and everyone else who sought to defame Holy Rus and the Empire; she killed in honor of her new home country and her ancestors who served the Tzars. She was a God-fearing, faithful, and patriotic conservative! She has earned her place in Heaven by virtue of being a Christian! Yet instead of offending, Father Adelheid merely laughed.

"Let's not think too far ahead…" he placed a hand on her shoulder. "But I believe you earned your place in heaven. You served your country to the best of your ability. You fought with honor, with integrity, and with utter selflessness. No Kaiser or Tzar could ask for any more in a soldier."

"You believe or you know?" Viktoriya spoke with a wisp of fire in her words. This sounded too good to be true.

"Both." he grinned. "You may doubt me but that is the case. You will go where the Argent Silver goes. You don't need to have a degree in rocketry to know that."

"But…"

"But what?"

"I offended her greatly."

"Why?"

"Because…because…" Viktoriya gulped, "I committed a grave sin: I said I loved her. Not love like loving a good book or song…but I love her like a woman loves another. My father has been trying to get me to marry a man and fulfill my Christian duty but I kept refusing - kept delaying - because I want…I want to claim the Argent Silver as my husband. I want Tanya von Degurechaff as my…other half."

"Yet, she is a woman." Father Adelheid looked thoughtful. "If only she were born a man…"

Viktoriya nodded, trying not to cry. If Tanya were a man, he would be the most handsome man in existence and everything would have resolved itself. Tall, broad-shouldered, with golden hair and sapphire eyes deeper than any ocean…

"Do you know why the Papal Church excommunicated me?" the priest replied in a hushed tone. Soon enough, they both found themselves seated among the assembly chairs. "I wanted to search for the truth. About God. About existence. About nature and the laws that governed it."

"For the longest time, I have made the mistake of ignoring the connection between God and Science. In my naive, reckless youth, I thought I could replace God with technology. That I could uplift mankind through discoveries…But the Great War happened and only then did I see how truly ignorant I was. To hear the voice of God in my dreams - that HE revealed to me the secrets of mathematics that I so desperately tried to unveil. You saw those visions too, don't you? Viktoriya? You're not alone in that feeling. His grace was the most humbling experience…I am so grateful that God showed me the error of my ways. With this revelation, I could finally accomplish things once thought impossible."

"But the Papacy…" Viktoriya remarked.

"The Papacy." Schugel nodded grimly. "My eyes have been opened to the presence of God that these…charlatans claim to experience. I began to question the traditions and structure that they upheld for over a millennia. Each inquiry further revealed how suffocating and corrupt the

system has become. 'We can't worship God like this.' I told the dusty old fools. Humanity can't progress and become closer to God if we continue this path of stagnation. We have made the mistake of separating science from its creator."

"But the Papal Church won't listen because why would they? When they have benefited most by keeping their flock ignorant and divided? God is of the earth, of water, air, and fire…and we, as God's faithful, must master these elements to demonstrate that we are made in his image. These equations I used daily during the Great War; they were not inventions. They were discoveries. The math has already existed, since the days of Adam and Eve, we just needed to uncover them. And by uncovering them, we can understand God better, and by understanding God better, we can worship and praise him better."

"But why start a new cul-heresy at all?" Viktoriya questioned. "Didn't you become a Protestant?"

"No, I told you before." He shook his head, "They are too divided and squabblesome. The Eastern Church remains primitive and rife with paganism. No, when I founded Positive Christianity - still laboring on the name - it was for one purpose: not to further divide Christianity but to unite it. A united Christendom. In Europe. Free from antiquated thinking and petty superstition. Where every man, woman, and child can use their faith and their intelligence for a singular, grander purpose. No more division. No more pettiness. No more separation of what is supposed to be one and whole."

The mad priest smiled eagerly in Viktoria's direction. "You know, Serebryakov, we could have that. A united Christendom. You could have Degurechaff as your husband. To bring forth a new age."

Though her mouth was shut, her eyes pleaded for it to be the truth.

"Serebryakov, if they don't accept you for who you are. Then leave them."

"But…who am I?" she asked incredulously.

"You are Viktoriya Ivanova Serebryakov, a veteran of the Great War and a soldier of God." He added, "And a champion. You are destined for greatness."

"Greatness…" She muttered, "You didn't answer my question."

"Yes." Father Adelheid smiled. "You will enter Heaven. You will go where the Argent Silver goes."

"But…my love - this lust - how?"

"Because it is not lust."

"How can you be so sure? Father Gregori -"

"Viktoriya," he huffed, "He may not recognize it but I do. And the purpose of this church and this religion is to bring humanity closer to God without any of these antiquated notions."

"You are asking me to leave my faith?!" She stood up immediately as if someone had set fire to the floor. "To leave everything I have fought for - killed for? What do you want from me?!"

"What do you want for yourself?" He shot back. "I washed you, bandaged you, and fed you from my hands. Look me in the eye and tell me that the Eastern Church brought you closer to enlightenment. Tell me that you are happy the way things are."

Viktoriya could not.

"I've attended Father Gregori's sermon once with you; I remembered that you ran out and heaved your luncheon into a nearby tree afterward. That man was all fire and smoke but without a hint of intellectual acuteness. He was a rabble rouser - not a real learner of God."

"I remember." she nodded before becoming silent again.

A long pause existed between the two loyalists.

"I want Degurechaff." the White Russy finally replied. "I want to claim her. I want to own her. There is no one else I would be content spending the rest of my life with."

Schugel smiled as he nodded in quiet satisfaction. Already, she could see the gears turning inside his head. "Did God reveal himself to you?"

"Yes." Viktoriya quickly nodded. "He did. I saw him in my dreams. I heard his voice. He showed me what would come."

"Good. Good." He got up from his seat and walked towards a closet at the end of the hall, beckoning for her to follow in his wake. "You are ready."

"Ready? Ready for what? Do I have to be baptized in a tub to join your faith?"

"Heh, not quite. I was referring to your destiny."

"Can you be any less vague?"

The pair finally reached the closet and with steady hands, Schugel silently opened the door. Inside were shelves laden with dusty folders, books, and other Degurechaffian posters. Everything was seemingly mundane and yet, the priest shifted his hand to touch a hidden

trigger from behind the door frame, causing a soft click, and the entire shelf moved to reveal a well-lit staircase leading down into a secret basement.

Viktoriya was taken aback by the ingenious contraption and would have stared at the revealed entrance for eternity if it weren't for the priest placing his wrinkled hand on her shoulder.

"I hold you to your word that you have been touched by God." He began, "What I am about to disclose to you will demand nothing less than automatic obedience and devotion for the Argent Silver. Your life for hers."

Viktoriya immediately brushed his hand away, seemingly offended by the skepticism and the constraints, before marching down the steps. "I have served her faithfully and without question for nearly 10 years. I will die for her if it means that she will live."

"Very well," he closed the door and restored the decoy shelf to its original position before joining Viktoriya at the bottom.

"What is this place?" she asked, peering at the corner as she sought out a light switch.

"My lab. One of them at least. I haven't used this area to its full potential during the Great War since I had a bigger facility."

Lights revealed dusty old boxes, drawers, and more chalkboards displaying diagrams and complex equations but unlike those displayed above, the mathematics in question had a singular goal, an actual purpose; A new computation orb. But why? Wasn't the one that Tanya used already far advanced for its time?

"What do you know of nuclear fission?" Schugel asked unexpectedly. He didn't sound like Father Adelheid anymore, no, he spoke as if he were Development Chief Engineer again.

"Neutrons smashing into neutrons who then smash into more neutrons," Viktoriya answered, glancing over the paperwork filled to the brim with scribbles and drawings, "Chain reaction ensues, criticality is reached…"

"Ah, so you have been paying attention to my sermons." the old man beamed, "You are more intelligent than you give yourself credit for."

"Splitting Atom from Eve…but why?"

"When the tide finally turned against the Empire, Zettour and Rudensdorf approached me for a wunderwaffe. One that could win us the war once and for all. A weapon that could end all wars. We had Tanya as our soldier but she wasn't enough. The computation orb I designed for her, I thought it was the answer, but God revealed to me that it was only a stopgap measure. No, the Argent Silver did not have her real weapon."

"An atomic computation jewel?" Viktoriya turned to look at the old scientist.

"Precisely. Giving the Argent Silver the power of the cosmos to deliver the Empire from calamity, but alas…I was too late. The war ended and I had to enact scorched earth upon my workshops and factories to prevent my research from falling into Allied hands."

"Yet these designs look recent. You didn't stop. Just by glancing at the material, you had to spend a lot of money. Funds that you shouldn't have access to."

"If you want to make money, you found a religion. If you want to make more money, make it a state religion." Schugel gave a crooked grin, acknowledging the financial advantage of starting a church. "But Zettour helped, hence why we have to play a part with the Junkers."

"Zettour? He paid for this?" Viktoriya refused to believe that the old bastard would spend a single coin for this project, no matter how grand.

"Only a little, the bulk of it was paid for by the government."

"The government?! How would Chancellor Berning even agree to go along with this unless -" The mage stopped mid-sentence as she suddenly remembered the paralysis between the Progressive Bloc and the Conservatives.

"Zettour has his influence, but Rudensdorf is the distraction, assuming he still remembers me." He moved over to show a receipt and while Viktoriya was no stranger to ledgers and accounts, the numbers and scale of operation were alien to her. This conspiracy had ties to scientists and engineers that had been scattered across the Post-Imperial states; coworkers and colleagues of Schugel. All of them embedded in or undermining the governments of Daneland, Pullska, Magyarorzag, Czech-Slovak State, Lotherin, Osterry, and even Illyria in Yugoslavia. All of them moved money and materials across various facilities only for it to all converge in a mountain lair in Osterry.

"I don't know politics or war." Schuge stated, "But I know mathematics and those who practice it."

"Such an operation would have been exposed." Viktoriya protested, "There are too many variables at risk."

"You would be right. The SPD nearly found out that I was siphoning funds away from the budget when they were investigating Zettour's and Rudensdorf's regime but then…the November Boycott occurred."

Vikoriya's blood ran cold. This was too much knowledge for her to take in. Tanya should have been here instead…

"So why me?" she whispered, "I am not a scientist or a tinkerer. What role exists that requires me?"

"Because it is nearly ready." He answered with great reverence, "We have a prototype approaching completion and there is only one mage in Germania strong enough to test it."

"But the Argent Silver isn't here."

"No, she isn't. But you are. Deus lo vult, Viktoriya. This is destiny."

"To be a prophet?" she gasped in open disbelief, all her past woes suddenly fading like mist.

"To be a Herald for the Prophet." Schugel smiled.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Leviathan Wakes - Part 1

Following the bombing, we proceeded with the putsch ahead of schedule. Much to my relief, the Osterrian Army joined our cause and refused to fire upon the agitated mob. However, Dollfuss fled like a coward to the Francois Republic, together with his remaining loyalists to set up a government-in-exile. At least, that was as far as rumors and speculation went. With our objectives accomplished most expediently, Heidler and I opted to allow the new Osterry government to be established by more politically interested men. Another Progressive coalition from the moderate left and right. As expected, the country will experience a snap election in a week or two, depending on how far they would have to root out fascist influence in the bureaucracy.

The communists, to my great surprise and worry, proved to be amicable to the Progressives - mostly due to our combined hatred of Dollfuss and his ideology - and agreed to stay passive in the planned election. Personally, I would opt to ban them from participation but I recognized that alienating them so early would spark an uprising. I wouldn't be opposed to crushing them myself; I'd just need a rifle and a few good men. The Army wouldn't have minded either, but Heidler and the new Progressive politely refused me.

"Enough blood has been spilled," he told me. Besides, the communists did help somewhat by adding further pressure on Dollfuss's regime. But to what extent, I don't know for sure. And neither does he. I suppose I could understand their reasoning: the transfer of power needs to be as peaceful as possible. If the communists play nice, then so be it. The new election will demonstrate to the Reds loud and clear that they were still neither favoured nor wanted.

Altogether the coup was proceeding smoothly, yet I was filled with a strange sense of dissatisfaction. Is it unreasonable to say that I was disappointed with how easy it was to stop the Ostnationalist regime? I expected the tyrant to put up at least some measure of resistance. But no; an angry mob was more than sufficient.

However, I could not discount the impact of my agreement with Theonau; a disloyal military was the last thing Dollfuss expected. Still, I hoped that as he flew away in his little plane, the stubby dictator looked down and witnessed everyone marching against the Presidential Palace and the Reichstag.

So here I was, eating dinner at Heidler's house again. The rally at the opera house…that was my second time dodging an assassination attempt, wasn't it? Whether it was the communists or Dollfuss, the results were the same: more kindling to the racist, fearmongering throughout Central Europe. Moreover, stories from Francia, Albion, and the Unified States did not paint a wholesome picture as anti-Judean sentiment became more mainstream news.

'If Judeans would conspire to kill the Argent Silver, the greatest war hero of the 20th century, what is stopping them from targeting Presidents, Kings, and other exalted members of society?' was the general message that these ultranationalists pushed on the frontpage. For all our

sakes, I hoped that the Unified States maintained its position as a democratic power. The American First Party, from what I read and could infer from Caldwell, shared similar views to Dollfuss regarding race. Their candidate for the future 1936 election seems to be a Southern segregationist from the state of Sequoyah. A standard xenophobe by all accounts.

I couldn't understand how figures like him, like Dollfuss, could be so popular. At best, they're charismatic orators. At worst, they're conmen. Then again, conmen have to be charismatic to attract gullible customers for their scam products. If anything, it says more about their constituents.

I glanced over to my left and once again stared at Addie Heidler, smiling and conversing with his wife. Why was he so happy? His restaurant was vandalized, his business was floundering, his neighborhood and community had been attacked, and Ruth would spend the rest of her life with one eye looking behind.

Every time I saw Heidler's face, I saw him. I saw the madman. I saw the tyrant. I saw the man who had made a permanent stain on history. Nothing about Heidler made sense. Nothing. And yet, here I was, being treated like a daughter he never had.

This had to be a dream. Or a nightmare. Alternatively, very bad satire.

Eventually, the chatter around the dining table ended as all eyes looked up in my direction. It seemed my face was the only one wearing a sour expression, contrary to my intention.

"Is there something wrong?" Heidler asked politely.

Is something wrong?

Where would I even start with such a question?

The world was losing its mind.

I was still a doll tortured under Being X's machinations.

My subordinates have gone mad and engaged in wanton brutality.

I had done everything I could to dispel every misconception about the Great War, about Konigsberg, about the opera house…yet those who need to hear it most won't listen.

Heidler is not Hitler, I reminded myself, this is a different world. He is not trying to be disingenuous nor is he another madman. He is…normal. Like me.

I should not have let my frustrations dampen the mood. Regardless of everything, this was still his house and I was the guest. He did everything in his power to accommodate me and it was

only fair I repaid him with courtesy and honesty. Heidler was just and well-mannered but a victim to cruel and unfortunate circumstances spawned by my - no.

This was Viktoriya's fault.

This was not my doing.

It was all hers.

She brought this upon me. Upon everyone. She ruined everything. All she had to do was listen to me. All she had to do was do nothing.

"I'm sorry." I bowed my head, "I've ruined dinner."

"No-no-no!" he refused my apology. "You did nothing of the sort. I just saw that you were brooding."

"I see."

"Is there something on your mind?" Ruth asked softly, her words carried a warmth I had not felt since being born into this new world.

"Heidler…" I began.

"It's Addie." He smiled, "I told you, we don't have to be so formal with each other."

"Addie." I sighed, "What were the 1910s like?"

Perhaps I should not have asked the question as the Heidlers set down their eating utensils in quiet melancholy; hell, I was born in that decade. Addie was no longer glancing in my direction, he merely leaned back in his chair as his entire life seemed to flash before his eyes. His hands were still for a moment before he raised one to cover his mouth as if he were trying to hold back tears. There were moments of pride, remorse, joy, and sorrow washing over his face as he seemed to recount every memory. Unlike Hitler, Heidler looked so vulnerable, so gentle, and so…real. I looked over to Ruth to find that she was also still. As if she were a model for a painted portrait. Her smile was more modest than her husband's as she recounted every failure and success she experienced. Every humiliation. Every triumph. Every loss on her journey to become part of a society that never truly accepted her. What was life truly like for Ruth, living in the Empire?

"Now that I think about it," Addie said to no one in particular before meeting his wife's eyes. "We…really did have everything, didn't we?"

Ruth could only smile in return before picking up her fork to poke at her dinner aimlessly.

"Addie?" I spoke up again, hoping to break him from his trance.

"The 1910s were a great time to be alive," he continued to remark as he turned to face me, "We were too blind to see it, but the Empire lost the moment we put you in a uniform. We failed as a people…"

"No, Addie. I volunteered. I wanted the fight. I wanted the war. I wanted to get out of the orphanage and seek my fortune."

"You poor thing…You never knew peace."

Oh great. I really don't want to make a grown man cry from nostalgia in his own home. Especially in front of his wife. I was born in the decade, after all, I just wasn't old enough to enjoy it to its full extent.

"Tanya?" Ruth said, "Do you regret the Empire losing the Great War?"

Hearing that question made me inhale deeply and let out a long huff.

Do I regret losing the war?

Do I, as a Japanese national, regret my country losing World War II?

I am proud of my country, like any other. I am proud of the culture, history, and scientific achievements of Japan. I am proud that I was born and raised in Japan. And yet, upon reading what the Imperial Japanese Army did in Asia and learning more about the MacArthur Shogunate, I have to conclude that Japan had to lose World War Two.

We had to be defeated by the Americans. We had to give up our imperial ambitions to become a democratic nation. No alternative path could guarantee the same level of liberty, individuality, and prosperity in modern-day Japan. Without defeat, my country could not become the best it could be for the Japanese people - for anyone living within its borders. Our empire was an empire of unadulterated brutality.

I want my country to be looked at with admiration, not disgust or fear.

How else could we, as a people, understand the consequences of reckless imperialism and militarism? How else could Japan become a center of technological and cultural innovation? We were humiliated, yes. We brought dishonor, yes. So let us strive to do things differently; to make this sorrow an opportunity for something better. Japan as a force for good is indeed possible. It could be done. It must be done. Easy to say, so much harder to do.

"No." I answered, "I don't regret losing the Great War. I am happy that peace has returned to Europe."

"Peace?" Ruth repeated.

"Peace. War. What is the difference? I was born too late to see the Imperial Project in action."

We had to lose the Great War.

We needed to.

It was the only way for Germania to truly reform into something better. Despite everything the Empire promised, the image of meritocracy and egalitarianism was just that. An image. The Great War had shattered that illusion for good.

We have to change. We must become better.

I just wish Viktoriya could understand that.

If the Empire had won, what would really change? All these prejudices would still exist, buried an inch deep under a layer of gilded soil.

At least with our defeat, everything had been brought into the light, unadulterated and exposed: this was a golden opportunity to finally make things right.

To set the stage for the modern world. My world.

The Empire was a victim, yes; attacked unjustly by the Legadonian Entente and the Francois Republic out of fear of our newfound strength, but how did we respond? By killing them in open malice and derision rather than using my victories as bargaining chips to end the war early. Instead, my accomplishments only served to incentivize further conquests than open diplomatic talks.

The Allied Powers merely wounded the Empire, we have done a good job of killing it ourselves.

What is the duty of a patriot if not to recognize both the flaws and virtues of his nation?

What have I done to praise Japan? I worked with open honesty and integrity, nor had I paid heed to the romanticists who viewed the militarist era with disgusting reverence. I voted with skill and intellect and cast my ballot to the most qualified candidate. I reconciled with the status quo.

"Addie," I spoke up again, "Could you call Richard tonight? I believe I'm ready to write that book."

His eyes immediately lit up with excitement. "As for Caldwell?"

"Contact her too. It will be a full day tomorrow."

I don't know why I said that. Every interview I had done barely put a dent in putting a stop to the conspiratorial talk and it seems, day by day, they only served to enhance the problems rather than reduce them. But, the American doesn't seem to be the kind that would smear my image or twist my words. Perhaps I could trust her….

As is his character, Richard seemed more excited upon seeing my face than even Millicent Caldwell. I almost regretted carrying this task out as the young man brought a camera to 'capture the moment' as he puts it. For God's sake, I already gave him my signature: autographed pictures, posters, books, and even his damn helmet.

"Let's get to your room." Richard half-suggested, half-commanded; such was his enthusiasm. He gently pushed Caldwell and Ruth up the stairs while Addie hefted the camera over his shoulders.

"Shouldn't we dress in more respectable attire?" I called out to the fanboy, as I had shed my KSA uniform for a white dress with black pants under the skirt and my well-worn but sturdy boots that were polished to perfection.

"Nonsense!" Richard laughed, "I didn't come prepared either!"

Richard, you dog, you and Caldwell are the most well-dressed people in this house right now. Compared to the suits and ties. Ruth looks like a scullery maid while Addie is dressed like a tramp from one of those American films. Regardless, he wanted a photo.

"Let's just get it over with…"

If I had known that Richard's camera would take one of the most famous pictures of my life and career, I would have worn something different.

The camera was situated in the hallway, looking into the guest room. I was sitting in the chair by the desk that Richard's typewriter rested upon, trying my best not to present an exaggerated caricature. I opted to make my smile soft, quiet, and as truthful as possible. I thought of the warm, delicious food that the Heidlers cooked, the coffee that Visha always served, and the day that the Great War ended. The Magyar-Dacian War was not too long ago, wasn't it? Peace was found only to be lost again.

Caldwell and Ruth, the furthest from me, sat on the bed, while Addie and Richard stood in front of the windows, as we waited for the camera to snap a picture. Once that matter was concluded, Addie and Ruth carried the device downstairs, leaving me alone with Richard and Caldwell.

"Who is going first?" the American inquired, anxious to get on with the meeting.

"I'd say Richard with the book." I replied, "You can still record our thought process and submit it as an addition to the interview. Gives more material for any readers of your newspaper."

"That's a great idea!" she exclaimed, quickly cracking open her suitcase to produce a blank notebook."

"With that matter settled, shall we begin?" Richard said, with a slight chuckle as he grabbed another seat to sit across from me.

I nodded.

"Who shall this book be dedicated to?" he inquired, his fingers about to blitz all over the typewriter.

"Dedication?"

"You don't have to think about it now." he remarked, "We could always come back to this question later."

"No need." I shook my head. "I already have a name."

~To Visha

The enemy of Love isn't Hate, it is Apathy. I Love and Hate everything about you because I wanted you to succeed.~

"That is pretty bold, heh. I expect nothing less." Richard smirked, "So the rumors are true then."

"What rumors?" I narrowed my eyes.

"You know…that you…prefer…female company…" He drawled.

"Does that offend you?" I raised an eyebrow. What is so suspicious of women working together in community service or corporate projects? Last time I checked, a man wasn't called gay when he shared his table with a male coworker on lunch break.

"Uhhhh…no, no." He immediately shook his head. "Of course not. It's a new era after all." He laughed awkwardly.

"Let's resume," I said.

"I agree." he nodded, while Caldwell laughed behind him.

To make sure that Viktoriya doesn't immediately throw away this book in disgust or embarrassment, I began recounting my life from the moment of my birth to the conscription notice. I figured she would be curious enough to know what my life was like before her; granted, my early childhood was rather mundane and unimaginative compared to my later exploits. I woke up as an orphan, ate food like an orphan, and prayed to God like an orphan. I still don't know who my biological parents were, and quite frankly, it no longer mattered. I want to spare them the burdens of having a famous, or rather infamous, offspring. A quiet life is what they deserve. Away from Being X's meddling in my life as well as…everyone else's.

While I was certainly trying to play up my patriotism to Richard, I had to acknowledge the economic incentives to volunteer. The Imperial Military-Industrial Complex was a crafty, manipulative institution, I'll admit, by taking advantage of Teutonic militarism to establish a society of peer pressure and collective shaming. Yes, it is a great duty to serve the Empire, to fight and die for the country, but not everyone could be a good soldier. A bad soldier is just as good as a dead one; an extra mouth to feed and more expenses to house and maintain. Zealotry is no compensation for bad maneuvers or poor planning; at least conscripts have the decency to prolong their own life in battle as much as possible.

Perhaps 'hate' is too strong of a word to begin with. Perhaps it isn't. I know I hate Doctor Schugel more for his lack of safety standards. Every testing pilot in his experiments had died before my arrival. I had every reason to be wary of him.

But truth be told, had I known the political machinations that governed Viktoriya's head, I would have left her to die in the Rhineland. I refuse to allow my public relations to be sabotaged by her vile and unsophisticated thinking any further. What she had conspired behind my back was extremely cruel, counterproductive, and highly unnecessary; all she had to do was listen to me and heed my previous statements on the matter. To make matters worse, my expulsion from the Germanian Democratic Party has shifted the narrative entirely against the Progressive Bloc; because of Viktoriya, all of the wrong people were blamed for entirely wrong reasons. There are no words to describe the horror and pain she had inflicted upon me.

And yet, I cannot scrub her out of my memories. How could I? I have never encountered someone so capable throughout my service for the Empire. Nor have I seen anyone who endured the Great War as tenacious as her. Viktoriya was everything I wanted in an adjutant; dare I say, she was perfect in every sense of the world. Looking back now, I was happy I met her - I still am - as her skill in brewing coffee remains unmatched even to this day. No cafe I have been a client to has served caffeine half as well as she does. But in all seriousness, I am deeply saddened and disturbed by how the peace brought on by Triano has warped her brilliant demeanor into something so insidious.

Perhaps, Viktoriya had indeed perished in the Great War and I was just too blind to see it. I am grateful that she had shared in my perils, every single one of them, as she was the only one who could keep me grounded - keep me sane - from all the bloodshed.

Eight years of warfare was too long. Too long for any person to endure.

Relating to the topic, Arene. Given how I am still considered a war criminal and wanted by the Allied Powers, I should take the opportunity to explain Arene. Nothing but propaganda and denialism circulate the city and now that Lergen has revealed to me the Francois atrocities in Brussels, Arene is perhaps the greatest example of double standard morality in the 20th century and the duplicity of Albish and Francian politics. I explained everything; from orders from the General Staff to the situation on the ground and the necessity to use force to maintain the war effort. The civilian population was given explicit orders to evacuate; they refused. They claimed to be armed combatants yet the insurrectionists made no discernable effort to distinguish themselves from the civilian body, in direct violation of established war clauses that all Great War belligerents agreed to uphold - except the Russy Federation but I digress. To make matters worse for Arene, multiple Imperial POWs were executed in cold blood by the rebel forces, footage captured via computation orb, which nullified whatever moral high ground they claimed to have.

Was the firepower we deployed excessive? Possibly. Was the Empire within its legal boundaries to employ the lethal force to dislodge the enemy? One Hundred Percent Yes.

Now, contrast this with Brussels, an Imperial city that fell under Francois occupation when Francia unjustly invaded the Empire from the west, hoping to take advantage of Imperial preoccupation with the Legadonian Entente. What was their justification? Nothing but fear of Imperial Hegemony.

Given how Brussels was a major industrial center, its capture by Francois forces was a substantial blow to Imperial war production, but unlike Arene, Brussels was declared an open city, in the vain attempt to preserve its historical monuments from shelling, while the Imperial garrison retreated to the River Rhine. The Francois Army faced no armed resistance whatsoever, and how did they react accordingly?

By looting the city of its industrial machinery, food supply, and riches. By setting fire to the University of Brussels and burning all of its academic papers. Raiding the city's museum of its priceless historical artifacts, depriving the Lothierns of their cultural heritage, to be shipped back to the Louvre. Yet most grievous of all, were the mass rape, deportations, and enslavement of its inhabitants. One morbid example, according to eyewitness testimonies, was how nuns were forced to be stripped naked by Francois soldiers under the pretext the women were spies or men in disguise, only to be raped for hours if not days by their captors.

Granted, I am not a Reichsmilitärgericht but, I do distinctly remember in my officer training course that I was drilled into my head Article 25 of the Rules of War on Land which an

occupying army was explicitly forbidden to engage in violence or murder on a civilian population in regards to their lives and personhood, to refrain from mutilation, torture, and cruel treatment; as well as preventing any assault on a person's dignity that would degrade and humiliate it. Article 26 outright banned the taking of hostages and the Imperial citizens were deported to Parisee, which would qualify as such.

To my inevitable detractors, if my claims cause such harm to the perception of your Francois Armed Forces, I do implore you to travel to Brussels and assess the damage for yourself! And then talk to the workers, the men, the women, and children who returned home, after this Great War that just ended, and examine their injuries. If anyone is a war criminal, it would be the Francois officers and soldiers who garrisoned Brussels.

"I beg your pardon!" Caldwell interrupted my monologuing like a student in a lecture, "Pray tell, that actually happened in Brussels?!" as a creeping, silent dread washed over her countenance "- it was true?" As she said it in horror, "I um, only thought it was hearsay from passing Lothierns."

I nodded before quickly explaining my previous meeting with the Reichswehrminister. Her eyes shot up in open awe as she immediately scribbled into her book when I reiterated what Lergen had revealed to me in Bendlerblock. If she was still skeptical, I offered to bring her to Lergen for an interview, which she promptly accepted.

"This is all too…amazing" she exclaimed, much to Richard's amusement. "Not that your suffering was amazing - I mean, I thought of going to the Lowlands but now that you mentioned Brussels, I'm tempted to head there directly."

"It would make a good story and finally bring awareness to the Francois atrocities." Richard smiled lightly.

On a more minor example of another Allied breach in established conventions of war, the usage of trench guns. At least, by that one Legadonian soldier that vowed vengeance against me. While the trench gun was…an unorthodox weapon to tear me out of the sky, it was still an illegal weapon to have been distributed and used in the Great War. In what reality could the Unified States violate a treaty under open daylight and vilify the Empire for responding by doing the same way afterwards?.

Moving on from that tangent, I return to Viktoriya and, to a greater extent, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion. What could I say that has not already been plastered across every propaganda poster in the Empire? Other than how damn proud of them I am for their tenacity and courage in battle. They could have requested a transfer to another unit when our battles became more and more impossible to accomplish. Even desertion would have been an understandable course of action in the face of such adversity. But they didn't, and so I commemorate them all. Viktoriya, Weiss, Neumann, Konig, Grantz, the lot…I am grateful that when I called for aid in Daneland and

Magyarozag, they answered. With such a dutiful generation of soldiers under my command, I had nothing to fear.

Proceeding onto the immediate post-war period, my demobilization. I suppose I was shocked and relieved back then on how quietly the Great War ended. I received the news that the Kaiser had abdicated, the Imperial Army was to be demobilized and disbanded, and I was free to go home. It was like being woken up from a dream - I was free. But, I didn't have a home to go to. I was practically an adult for the orphanage that raised me since I was a baby. I would have been another burden to the nuns that watched over me in my earliest days.

Not to say that I wouldn't try to earn my keep, like chopping wood or tending the garden, but such menial tasks would have left me restless. War, as it turned out, did not leave me so easily. Thank God that my time with the orphanage was brief as Magyarozag called for aid.

This dissolution of the Little Entente is less of the success of my meddling and more of an abysmal effort of the Francois diplomatic corp. Dacia proved that there could be no trust among the defensive partners where border disputes were concerned. The Legadonian Entente demonstrated how neutrality failed to protect a minor state, even though Daneland reconsidered its stance and sought entry into the alliance. That had been a golden opportunity for the Francois Republic to restore confidence and garner respect from the post-Imperial states, yet they squandered it by appeasing the aggressor. Considering how Osterry, Magyarozag, the Czech-Slovak State, and Pullska maintained close ties with Daneland, Parisee prioritizing the Legadonian Entente was nothing short of idiotic.

To add further insult to injury, Lotheirn would have been the nation most susceptible to Francois influence given the proximity, but given how the Francois remains most adamant to deny what occurred in Brussels, it was no surprise that Amstreldam jumped at the first opportunity to join Pilsud's new alliance, the Intermarium.

My recounting was interrupted when Addie appeared in the door frame to pass around coffee and milk. Just in time too. My throat was getting parched and I desired something more than cold water for a change.

"How's progress?" He inquired.

"It's massive." Richard relaxed and stretched out his fingers, "Good thing you're still young, Argent Silver, otherwise, there wouldn't be enough room for your other ideas."

"How are you feeling, Caldwell?" the baker turned to talk to the reporter.

"Never been better." she beamed, "Thanks for asking, Mister - I mean, Herr Heidler."

"Please, call me Addie." He grinned, "We're all friends here."

"Oh, thanks, Addie."

"So what part are you two going to do next?" Addie turned to address Richard and me.

"Politics," Richard replied with a respectful grunt. "The meat and potatoes of why we are doing what we are doing."

"I suppose," I remarked, taking a sip of coffee, "That is one simple way of saying it. Now, if you don't mind, Addie. Let's proceed."

"We're starting with Herr Schlage?" Richard questioned innocently. I only responded with a sideways smile.

Oh, Schlage. Woe to you and the Germanian Democratic Party. I truly meant what I'd said: that I aspire for nothing more than to do the liberal movement justice in these tumultuous times. Individual liberty is the universal truth of society; freedom of movement, of speech, of religion, of politics, I could name them all. I am not the imperialist that you fear me to be nor am I a fascist sympathiser. I despise totalitarian rule, by principle, as such a system will only lead to ruin and damnation - a culture of fear and corruption. It is only unfortunate that soldiers, alive or dead, make terrific icons of worship for far-right fanatics to prop up as their champions.

The conservatives had overplayed their hand in the Great War and paid dearly for it. It was natural for the liberals and the social democrats to step in to rectify the crisis. Again, I do not fault them for signing the treaty. Allow me to reiterate that the problem is believing that the Treaty of Triano was signed with honorable intentions. The Empire was the one attacked in the Great War, our military actions were defensive and reactionary. With me at his side, I could have helped place trust into the new republican system as I believe in the democratic process. I still do today.

Caldwell was extremely curious about how I would assist the Progressives had I remained and so, much to Richard's poor fingers, I expanded this rant into a more formal lecture going over capitalist theories, fiscal responsibilities, and minutia of an economic recovery plan I had hoped to cooperate with Schlage. Of course, every question Addie and Caldwell asked threw my lecture off track numerous times, so much so that I had to exert immense effort to steer the conversation back to the topic of Schlage. I was guilty in taking pleasure in allowing myself to be an educator for the moment, reveling in my academic knowledge from my past life of management, logistics, and economics. Judging by the dumbfounded look on Caldwell's face, I may have spoken too much. Addie excused himself from the room when I explained what a "deposit insurance" was, proclaiming how his head felt swollen and about to burst, while Richard looked as if there was not a single thought behind his eyes. Suffice to say, they had no frame of reference as to what I was saying; I can't fault them, much of what I was saying could only have been imagined as a bureaucrat's utopian dream. Chances are, I accidentally used terminologies that weren't invented this early in the 20th century, especially when the nations have different names here.

"You spoke of 'Dutch Disease'..." Caldwell murmured, overwhelmed by my foresight, "What is 'Dutch'?"

"Nevermind that word." I hid my face behind another gulp of coffee. Not to discredit the Heidlers, but I still prefer Visha's brew. "Moving on."

I hope that I explained it in simple terms enough for Viktoriya to understand. For her to recognize why I was furious from her ignorant meddling. Germania would have been well on its way towards recovery if it weren't for her…idiocy.

"Perhaps we should move onto another person…" Richard remarked, inserting another piece of paper into his typewriter.

"Why?" I found myself glaring daggers at him, considering how pale he immediately turned. There is so much more I wanted to say about her!

"Outside of Viktoriya and the 203rd…" he gulped, "Was there anyone else who you encountered regularly in the Great War?"

Dr. Adelheid von Schugel…What a madman; more insane than Viktoriya - no…he is more sane than her. For all his insanity, he did not reveal to me his opinions of race nor seem to be interested in conspiracies. After all, he is the scientist that lives in his own interpretation of reality. God, I swallowed the vomit that nearly erupted from my mouth.

I would have attacked him with more ferocious rhetoric but since I heard that the mad scientist had chosen the life of priesthood and relegated science to a hobby, I opted to be more forgiving. I merely explained to Richard and Caldwell about my initial fears and worries towards the man as I had heard nothing but ill news from his lab work, regardless of the importance of his studies. I kept it brief but made it clear that his disregard for orthodox safety measures was extremely irresponsible and had placed my life in jeopardy numerous times. If it weren't for luck, God's favor, and my natural skills, the Empire would have lost its greatest asset.

Indeed, Schugel was gambling my life for the success of his pet projects and perhaps, it did pay off considering how long the Empire lasted in the Great War. But that alone did not bring about the final victory over the Allies. Quite frankly, it was nothing short of a miracle he got to keep his doctorate.

Which brings me to my current predicament.

When Viktoriya approached me as to why I chose to align with the Germanian Democratic Party, I should have taken her aside and explained my desires for the future more clearly. The entire time, I had operated under the assumption that she recognized how much it was a golden

opportunity for the two of us, as women in the Imperial Armed Forces, to stake a claim in the republic.

If she were to ask me the question again, as to why that party and the man, it is due to one universal truth: liberty. Let the record be known that I support individual rights as the most paramount duty for society and government to safeguard. Every man, woman, and child is entitled to his or her own opinions and set of beliefs, regardless of the current order of government - within reasonable limits, of course - Dacia and Germania are the greatest examples of this principle applied in the most abhorrent manner.

It is a paradox, the Paradox of Tolerance, for a safe and democratic society would have to tolerate such vile and discriminatory rhetoric. I have seen firsthand the effects of such enabling actions; it is nothing short of a living nightmare. A nation, a society, has the moral obligation to protect its citizens from foreign and domestic enemies. Who are these domestic foes? Slanderers, saboteurs, demagogues and murderers - traitors all. As a principle, freedom of speech comes with the responsibility of honest discourse and open debate. A duty that these monsters overlook in the pursuit of their nihilistic dogmas, and thus, they shall be subject to the harshest penalties.

Once again, I would have to put into writing my stance on the anti-semitic conspiracies that have erupted around my person, clinging to my reputation like a leech. These fascists and right-wing extremists constantly postulate the existence of a hidden cabal of Judeans that lurk behind closed doors; first, we must be aware of how frequently they move the proverbial "goalposts" to avoid admitting fault - initially they falsify that the Empire lost due to ethnic meddling yet miraculously changed their tune to allude to Judean-backed assassinations when I had explained a more mundane cause of our defeat; and second, a secret organization of this magnitude, longevity, and gravitas is a physical impossibility. There are too many variables that need to be perfectly controlled to make this conspiracy remotely realistic.

Viktoriya, the Russy Empire did not fall due to the Judeans. It fell because of decades of religious dogmatism, an inadequate administration, a distorted bureaucracy, institutionalized corruption, and a general lack of progressive and liberal reforms to placate and uplift the lower classes and people of the Empire into a more prosperous living standard. The fact that the leadership of the Bolshevik revolutionaries happens to contain Judeans is merely a coincidence or symptom of the racial caste system the Russy Empire maintained in some capacity.

Viktoriya, I know that you are proud of your White Russy heritage. I know that you are proud of your family and its service to the Tzars. But you need to understand that your family, and you, are dogs fighting for a tyrannical regime. You may be of a minor nobility, but that title was given to the detriment of the commoners. You are just as disposable to the Tzardom as the laborers in the factories. Because of propaganda, religious and political, your family has been fighting against its interests for the past century. The Judeans that have been labeled as scapegoats for the cultural and economic rot are just that, scapegoats. Killing them did nothing to change the

circumstances for the better. Because they weren't the reason why the Tzardom fell - it was madness and stupidity that killed the Tzar.

Viktoriya, I was enraged towards you because I expected better. You are not a number on a ledger, not to me, and it is sickening how you allowed yourself to be led astray by fear and sorrow. You did your duty to the Empire to the best of your ability, the very same dedication that everyone had given to the Fatherland in the Great War, and dare I say, that the real treasonous talk came from your mouth and the mouths of these criminals. I would sooner congratulate stolen valor than allow honored veterans be denied the recognition of their self-sacrifice and patriotism due to their racial, religious, and gender identity.

"Gender identity?" Caldwell perked up once again, causing me to smirk "That's a unique way to put it."

You have no idea what awaits you in the future, do you? You may not be ready but your grandkids will be thrust into the frontlines of that battle.

"What's so funny, Tanya?" Richard questioned. "Have you thought of a joke to put into the book?"

Joke? JOKE? I am the joke! It's so hilarious that the greatest threat to my career is the one person I trusted the most. Not Rohr, not the Communists, not the Western Allies, it was Viktoriya…and the legacy she carried.

"So how's progress?" Heidler addressed his friend as he marched down the stairs with his equipment in tow. Caldwell was not too far behind him. The pair had to return to their residence now that the sun had set. Come tomorrow, they will return. "I heard laughter. What happened?"

"What happened…" Hessen-Buhler gave an awkward laugh before leaning forward to whisper. "Is that I found out that the rumors were true…she is queer."

"She is full of surprises, isn't she?" Heidler hummed, watching Caldwell bid farewell to him and Ruth, "The world is changing so fast."

"How did she obtain all this knowledge? That is what I cannot fathom."

"Experience and academics, my friend."

"That makes no sense because I have a degree in business and economics." Hessen-Buhler furrowed his massive brows. "And what she had shared does not appear in any of the textbooks I remember. Hell, not even my old professors had the foresight that she does. I know they would love to have a lecture with her as the guest speaker."

"One miracle at a time, Richard." Heidler patted his battle brother on the shoulder. "Come, have some coffee before you depart."

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Leviathan Wakes - Part 2

I didn't have to wait long before Richard and Caldwell - Milicent, I mean; she insisted on a first-name basis - arrived at Addie's doorstep. We had just barely finished our breakfast before we heard a massive pounding on the door. The ferocity initially sparked worry in Ruth and her husband before the sound of Richard's ecstatic voice launched the baker into a hurried step.

"What if he was forced to turn against us?" she spoke in a fearful shudder.

"Richard would be in cold, soft dirt before that happens," he assured her, swinging open the door to reveal his friend and our American reporter.

I gave a polite sigh of resignation as I moved my body to greet Richard with a handshake. Instead, he immediately grabbed my hand and pulled me in for a massive bear hug. At that moment, I wished he kissed my hand like Goering had. He had at least given me some breath of space, even if I was treated like royalty. But, at least he didn't take a picture - oh, nevermind, Milicent used Richard's camera to capture the shot.

Perhaps I should embrace the madness instead. I heard there is bliss in being part of the mob…

I began the first hour of our session by answering questions that Richard and Milicent had thought of overnight, all of them relating to economics and finances. I had to hide my shock when he revealed to me his background in business studies and that he had previously held a role similar to my past life in his family's company in Aegyptus. Unlike the reporter, his questions were a lot more damning.

If this were modern Japan, I could have explained away his confusion with terrific ease, but since this is 1934, my answers could be taken as words from a con artist or mental patient. It's not a fault of Richard; he just cannot comprehend the historical context that occurred in the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s in my previous life. It was certainly a unique challenge, trying to mold my answers to fit the societal progression of this timeline, but I could only feel a hint of shame for not giving the full picture. The last thing I want is for him to learn the wrong lessons from my responses.

Without modern technology, there are some techniques and ideas that we just can't implement to resolve the economic crisis. No matter how useful they are right now.

But Richard was satisfied enough, allowing me to shift attention away from economics and onto the Treaty of Triano. Now, if I were in the position of a far-right nationalist political party seeking a seat in the Reichstag or even the office of Chancellor, railing against the treaty would be an easy ticket toward an electoral victory. It is terrifyingly easy for politicians and demagogues to tap into the growing frustration and resentment among the Germanian people. A few campaign slogans here, some rallies there, and the voter base will come flocking towards their banner in search of a quick and easy solution out of this depression.

I applaud the Progressives for sticking to their principles and choosing to reconcile with reality rather than mislead their constituents. This is why, to Richard's and Milicent's sudden bewilderment, I took the position that the Treaty of Triano was too lenient. Radical, I know. Treacherous, perhaps. But that is the truth as I see it. The death of the Empire softened the ire of the Allied Powers toward Germania now that the massive state had been fragmented.

Without a doubt, the war reparations are indeed massive and burdensome for the republic, but not impossible to pay off. Every cent can be repaid with time, but the problem lies in both the attitudes of Germania and the Allied Powers. Again, given enough time, the war debts can be repaid, but the Francois Republic and the Commonwealth of Albion are stubborn, prideful, and impatient: they want their payments now and in full since they, too, are in debt to their American backers. It is more pragmatic to consider debt forgiveness as an alternative and compensate with the desire for financial restitution with mutually beneficial trade agreements.

In the grand scheme of things, Germania got off lightly. Compared to how Japan was thoroughly demilitarized and under American occupation by the Gaijun Shogun, the Treaty of Triano at least allowed the republic to have an army. If Francois wanted to destroy the very concept of Germania, they could have done more than just make a few regions of the Empire independent - they could have forced the total abolition of the entire Germanian Armed Forces, separate and de-industrialize the Rhineland, and interfered with the crafting of the new republican constitution to make it more Francois-inclusive. The Allied Powers had the opportunity to march directly to Berun and enforce their punitive treaties by force. If the Allied armies brought food and medicine to give to the locals, then the Germanian people would surely welcome this dissolution of the Germanic state.

Germanians haven't realized it yet, but the Allied Powers do want to reintegrate the country back into the European continent. It is easy to say and believe that the Treaty of Triano was extremely cruel, but it is a perspective of scale; before the Great War, the Empire had quadrupled the economic output compared to the Francois Republic, given its greater size, population, resources, and labor pool. By reducing Germania to the core regions, Francia has made it a more equitable partner for trade without fear of economic domination. The Francois would be extremely foolish to not take the chance to engage in this opportunity to establish a friendly neighbor that chooses diplomacy over aggression, peace over war, and friendship over grudges.

Yet, I would be lying if I said that opportunity has long since sailed thanks to their own arrogance. If the Francois owned up to their war atrocities in Brussels and created a precedent of accountability in this new European order, they could have garnered goodwill from the post-Imperial state of Lothiern, which would then translate to further optimism from the new nations in Central Europe. Optimism and trust that will form the bedrock of the Little Entente. But, alas, Parisee will have to live with the consequences of their failed calculations, and I will not shed any tears for them. They chose their nation above the continent, and now the Soviet

Federation will look at these small, independent nations as future conquests for its violent revolution.

This leaves Albion to pick up where Francia failed, but unfortunately, they too will falter in this responsibility to secure and maintain the new status quo. The largest empire in the world is too big for Europe. Either Londonium prioritizes the defense of the Home Islands or its colonies, but not both. The Great War was already expensive for Albion, but the cost of maintaining military occupation in foreign lands across multiple oceans will only continue to rise. The vastness of the Albish Empire will implode on itself, starting with its treasury, as the consciousness of independence and self-determination across Africa, Asia, and the Americas will only continue to grow and be shared. By choosing splendid isolationism and retreating to their island, the Albish have forfeited their role in continental peace.

Unless they can build their warships to sail across land, the Red Army will march west and plant their flag in Berun, if not on the Rhine.

As for the Americans, well…given how Japan prospered under the nuclear umbrella, Europe being under the American sphere would be a blessing and a curse. A blessing in a future superpower would protect the continent from Soviet aggression but a curse if there is ever a situation of American imperialism, or worse, American neglect. Given the America First movement that has been growing in popularity daily, I don't have high hopes when it comes to their foreign policy. In the end, all that they care about is their money and their self-righteousness. Not necessarily in that order.

So where does that leave Germania and its sister republics, Magyarozag included, in the future? From what I have seen and inferred, there are only two outcomes: we either unite as European brothers and sisters or become conquered individually. Becoming nothing more but mere satellite states for the Bolshevik menace.

Once again, was Triano harsh? It was no harsher than the treaty enforced on Francia after the Franco-Preussian War. Was Triano unjust? Absolutely. And the Allied Powers will reap the consequences as the result.

Needless to say, this whole situation could have been avoided if the Kaiser and the Brass had listened to me for a change. And yes, I don't miss him at all one bit. Sure, he gave me a fancy sword for my services, but how does that compensate for the opportunities he willingly let slip away in favor of more immediate short-term gains? Advantages that I risked every inch of my life, blood, sweat, and tears?! And bone and skin to deliver?!! One after fucking another?!!!

It was extremely telling when a conservative military brat like Weiss considers me a worthy inheritor of that empty throne, damning centuries of rituals, tradition, and old rites by making me a usurper. All in all, reality always triumphs over opinion.

Speaking of, it's high time I exposed the cheap but effective, manipulative tactics the far-right uses in distorting the news. Compared to the refined techniques of modern advertisement strategies and corporate jargon, the rhetoric these fascists implemented is seemingly basic. For Viktoriya's sake, I sincerely hope she will read this section.

Dictating my thoughts to Richard, I want her to understand that Fascism does not appeal to the mind but to her base emotions. It is not logic that the vile ideology appeals to, not unlike communism, but euphoria - the overwhelming sensation of feeling good about oneself. Like a commercial advertisement, fascist demagogues rely on bright, contrasting colors and stark symbology to captivate the audience on a deeper psychological level. The ring of a doorbell, the chimes of a cash register, the drums of war, and the trumpets of victory mixed with campaign slogans and tasteful imagery are used to invoke the sensation of raw desire and conformity. Instead of selling toothpaste and bandages, the ideologues sell addictive candy as their vision of a fascist utopia.

Like the doctor with his patient, the candyman appeals to the collective identity of his consumers, fans the flames of alienation and sense of loss, and altogether promises a bright future that could only be secured through the consumption of his products; all while he dilutes, distills, and disseminate reality in neatly cultivated and digestible narratives. I presented a rhetorical question to Richard and Milicent to imagine a future where technology has advanced so much that the techniques of persuasion that a single advertisement could not just suggest what a customer should buy but also reprogram how they should think and feel about the product.

Of course, I didn't need to imagine that reality. I already lived in it. Hell, I even worked to perfect it. The common citizen with little experience or knowledge of technology or mass marketing techniques will find himself trapped very quickly in a world where reality and fiction converge with surgical precision. By the time he is remotely aware of how his life has been carefully cultivated by advertisers, he would not care as he was already conditioned to accept these products and these services without a second thought. He would conform out of fear of losing the familiar. To truly escape, he would have to burn everything down.

But why would he? He will have anime waifus annually and video games to compensate for his boring and directionless life while I will get to live at the top surrounded by comfort and luxury. That was the original plan, at least.

Unlike the items in corporate ads, Fascism is a deeply negative product; instead of offering relief or joy, it encourages the consumer to be hateful, distrustful, extraordinarily violent, and willfully blind to the consequences of their ignorance. In a way, Fascism is one giant scam, a Ponzi Scheme, that will or has consumed entire political movements or potentially, an entire nation. The people will not just be conned out of their wages but also their future, their home, and their very lives. They will be forced to confront reality by methods deemed unassailable and immediate, like the sun exploding over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

But how could someone as intelligent and kind as Viktoriya be consumed whole by this con - fascist and communist alike? By manipulating language. Ask any lawyer or businessman, and he will all tell you the same answer: in the field of politics and economics, be very distrustful of words. A Gun is a Gun. Death is Death. Business is Business.

Richard laughed out loud. "You learned the trade well! Are you sure you weren't a professional propagandist during the Great War?"

I rolled my eyes. "It was a part-time endeavor."

Regardless, language, when wielded with malicious intent, is a greater weapon than any form of artillery or warship. The pen IS mightier than the sword - the greatest military victory is achieved when one side surrenders without a fight. Fascist, communist, liberal, or conservative, no self-respecting regime could risk being too transparent with the public and thus must master the art of euphemisms and constructed speech; they lie to the masses by telling the truth. Ideally.

But to focus on Fascism specifically, since Viktoriya would no doubt be very familiar with it considering her past actions, let's dismantle a generic talking point as an example.

"National Renewal" is a common, practically generic, expression of fascist movements, whether in Germania, Osterry, Pullska, or Magyarozag. It is also extremely vague, intentionally so, and by broadening the definition, it allows all sorts of people to interpret and cast their own biases onto the phrase. This fluidity dilutes the phrase into nothing while simultaneously obscuring the awful reality of what "national renewal" would entail. If you have any doubts, consider speaking to a Francois about his opinion on the current state of his republic; a utopia in Francia is going to look very different from a utopia in Germania.

"Revolutionary Justice" is a generic catchphrase by the Bolsheviks and their communist associates, but consider for a moment what that means. What is "justice" and how does their movement make it "revolutionary?" The very concept of Justice is one of the oldest ideas in human history - as old as money and prostitution - the word, when simplified to its most basic roots, simply means righting a wrong. So what does it mean to make it "revolutionary?" Personally, I considered it to be a catchy tagline to appeal to the grievances of the middle and lower class, both real and imaginary, against the upper class, nothing more. After all, look who is the current head of state for the Russy Federation. How is his brand of justice any different from the Tzars before him?

"Unity and Strength."
"Strategic Realignment."
"Equality and Liberation."
"Streamlining Operations."
"Permanent Revolution."
"Downsizing."
"Restructuring."

"Collateral Damage."

What do all these words have in common? They are all tools of psychological manipulation designed to circumvent critical thinking and elicit emotional conformity. One could foresee the future where media technology will be advanced to the point that messages can be written, sent, and received within a matter of seconds, and thus, linguistic manipulation could be used to centralize and spread propaganda ad infinitum. Institutions - political, corporate, or otherwise - will continue and perfect their use of manipulated language to shape public reception and regulate their behavior.

The sure way to penetrate this jargon is to interrogate the language, demand clarity and specificity, and recognize the context in which these words are said, why it is said, and to what ends these words attempt to achieve.

"You're too smart for your own good. Has anyone told you that?" Ruth suddenly appeared in the doorway of the guest room to hand each of us a cup of coffee. Her voice was unusually melancholic.

"You're the first." I laughed lightly.

"I scarcely could imagine what your friends and allies would make of this," Richard grunted, blowing on his cup.

"If they respect me, then they will respect my thoughts and my words."

"And if they don't?" Milicent asked innocently.

"Then everything I had done would have been for nothing," I replied, causing her to shrink under my gaze.

You're playing a dangerous game." Richard scoffed.

"I'm a dangerous woman."

"Would your…benefactors appreciate your work?" Ruth inquired softly.

"Of course they will, once I make it clear how wrong they are." I huffed. "Besides, I'm a free woman. Like you."

"Then you are not really free." She shook her head solemnly before leaving with the tray underneath her arm.

"How ominous." Richard bemoaned sarcastically. "Don't tell Heidler I said that. But, shall we continue?"

I underestimated how long it took for us to write a draft. It took us a couple of weeks to explore a wide variety of topics ranging from the monarchy, economics, capitalism, individualism, pacifism, the Imperial Army, the men of the 203rd, organized labor, wages, office life, war, imperialism, diplomacy, the various machinations of the Junkers, my interests, my former classmate in Osby, and my "unique" relationship with God. Richard found it funny that I worship "like a Protestant in denial" for a Papist, whatever that means.

I have devoted another chapter to breaking down the euphemisms that these idiots have said and will say regarding the Stab-in-the-Back Theory. If I encounter one more person who still regurgitates this nonsense, I shall direct them to this section and then beat them on the head with it.

Philosophy, career paths, feminism, my initial aspirations, Progressive politics, my time under Schlage, the legacy of the Empire, the orphanage I grew up in, the concept of clean energy as an alternative, and by the time I got to explaining the oil, coal, and natural gas industry and the pollutants it brings to the atmosphere, I was growing rather tiresome at the end. I just wanted this project done so I could move on to Yugoslavia. We haven't even arrived at the stage of editing and reviewing.

"Finding a publisher should be of no issue." Richard mumbled as he leaned back into his seat, "It's what they would make of this book."

"Richard," I gently placed my hands on his shoulders to stir him awake, "If there are any revisions to be made, I must be notified first to give my approval. Nothing should change without my knowledge, understand?"

"I-I understand. Of course." He nodded quite fiercely. "Just know we may find our correspondence will be difficult with you in the southern kingdom."

"Trust me, Richard. I will find out if you do."

Of course, we just weren't sitting at the Heidler House the entire time. The Ostprogressive Bloc made tremendous gains in dismantling the fascist apparatus that took hold of the national government and moved to ban Dollfuss's party as well as imprisoning his allies and supporters.

Unsurprisingly, the Pan-Germanian fascists did not take it well when the ban also encompassed their political movement. They cited that since they were allied with the Silver Revolution - not my first pick for the name - they should be exempt from the ban. The Bloc nearly gave into their reason until I gently reminded everyone about the November Boycott and how the Pan-Germanian fascists were just as bloody and eager as the Ostnationalists.

Needless to say, they either moderate their platform under the direction of the Progressives or I will moderate them under the direction of my rifle.

It was good that I could still bring people to a mutual understanding.

But this eventually led to the much bigger question: what to do with the fallout of the boycott? It's one thing to hang the politicians and imprison their enablers, but how can you physically hold the entire populace of a nation-state accountable? Everyone was either a victim or a perpetrator.

Issuing heavy fines would have achieved nothing, not in this wretch of an economy, and imprisoning guilty civilians would only take skilled human labor out of the workforce that industries and businesses need. We could give everyone who participated in the atrocity a black mark on their public record, but it would just be ink on a piece of paper; its negative association would no longer be seen as severe if everyone has it.

I don't like resorting to half-measures but what the Ostprogressives could do is offer compensation to the victims in addition to paying for the repair costs. Addie and Ruth will have their restaurant back. The Ostjudenvolk that fled abroad, if they could prove that their property was desecrated and their lives at risk, would be given the same treatment as well. The program would be prohibitively expensive for the small nation but it was important to stress that this will be a step in the right direction to eventually rectify all grievances inflicted on the injured party.

There's also to protect the Progressive government from a military coup. The easy part was disbanding the militias and integrating their members as national policemen or returning them to civilian life. As for the Junkers, there was an opportunity when Warschau presented Wien membership into the Intermarium; even though I disliked and distrusted Pilsud for his manipulations, sending Theoneau to Pullska as part of an Osterrian attache would keep Zettour's associate away from influencing the Reichstrat or the Chancellery.

Given the immense prestige of the position, Theoneau would have to accept, especially if he is as much a careerist as me.

Hell, it wouldn't just be him: keep the politicized Osterrian Junker generals separate and away from each other by sending them to Lothiern, Magyarozag, the Czech-Slovak State, and Daneland. Even though their expertise would be badly needed in Osterry in case of a foreign invasion, either from Yugoslavia or Illdoa, the chances of it happening are slim. From what I've read in the newspapers, Roma was more interested in the Adriatic coastline of Yugoslavia than the mountains of Osterry. Such is the failure of Triano.

"Well, Addie." Richard yawned with his mouth as wide as a cavern, He leaned back into his chair to stretch. The two men were sharing a table outside a cafe, taking a moment to exist outside of the life of their golden-hair child. "We are finally done with the draft."

"Amazing work, brother. What is she going to do now?"

"Talking with Milicent, I suspect. That reporter has the patience of a saint to have waited this long for an interview."

"Hmph. Did Tanya already name her book?" Addie asked as he bit into a chocolate muffin.

"She wanted it simple: 'My Political Record' she told me."

"How…perfectly mundane and humble."

"My thoughts exactly! I figured that someone like her would have a more…more…"

"Grander title?"

"Yes, exactly that!"

"Do you have a suggestion?" Addie inquired from his friend.

"Glad you asked. I did tell her." Richard sat up straighter in his seat. "I proposed the title to be 'The Leviathan of Berun. '"

"Hmmm, that's a great idea! You're a genius."

"I know!"

"Did she agree?"

"She told me she didn't care about the title as greatly as the contents of her book."

"That was a yes, I assume?"

"It was a yes; she agreed."

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Want To Be Free

"Are you ready for your first question?" Milicent's voice chirped like a canary.

I tried not to groan too loudly at her words. Hofburg was a gorgeous monument to the eyes, even though the location was rather spectacular to host an interview. However, I felt usually irked, much to my own bewilderment.

After all, I'm visiting places I would never have had the time nor the expenses to do so in my previous life as a salaryman, perhaps if I had retired. I gazed back at the traditional seat and winter vacation home of the Habsburgs, the dynasty that ruled half of the southern Empire before their union with the Hohenzollern North, and pondered if the old Grand Dukes were just as competent as the men who constructed this palace.

It was the kind of ostentatious opulence that only an ancient and influential imperial dynasty could conceive: gold chandeliers and chalices, marble columns, halls stacked with mirrors, and countless portraits of dead Habsburgs staring down the present Osterrian for any signs of inadequacies. Like all Imperial aristocrats, the Habsburgs loved their symbols, their grand gestures in political theatre as though the world never progressed past the 1600s.

Nothing but a mirage of relevancy. It was the bureaucrats and soldiers that gave the Imperial elite their dues. If the walls could talk, they would complain about the paperwork they had to fill out to clean up after their masters. Despite everything that has occurred in Wien, the palace still endures.

Given that we were given free access to tour the grounds to our hearts' content, I had to pull Milicent out of Hofburg lest we waste the entire day inside.

"Yes," I huffed, stretching my arms behind my back as my eyes looked upward to gaze upon Prince Eugene of Savoy, his statue capturing the Habsburg greatness that his family so desperately tried to immortalize.

"I have read your previous statements with the DNVP interviewer, Stricher, and considering everything that has occurred since then," Milicent began slowly, "Perhaps, for the record, it is best to lay it out clearly in direct terms…"

"Yes?" I raised an eyebrow. "Get on with it."

"Why do you care about the plight of the Judeans?" she gulped suddenly.

On second thought, perhaps it was best to leave her inside Hofburg.

"Should I reword the question?" the American quickly panicked as she found my attention increasingly elsewhere. "Please, don't think too poorly of me! I just want to get to the truth."

"As do I…" I muttered. "How many times do I have to hear that question…"

"Just once," Milicent promised, "And never again, afterward."

I sigh more loudly this time.

Why do I care about them?

I care about Ruth…as a neighbor and fellow countryman but on a personal level…do I care about her?

I would defend her rights and her personhood like any other. As I would defend Viktoriya, Weiss, Lergen, and my men in the 203rd.

But do I care about her? Her and the rest of her people?

I have seen their burdens, their dreams, and their will to adapt; no different than my peers in my company or the people of Japan. Who doesn't want to succeed and prosper? Who doesn't want to grow their careers to its fullest potential? Who doesn't want to live in a safe and respectable society?

Milicent is clearly asking if I have a sentimental attachment to the Judeans. As if everything I had done was conducted out of empathy, but I want to say that is not the case.

And yet…

"Is there a reason why I should not care?" I replied, feeling lost at my question. "The Judeans. They're people. Like us. I can hate the individual Judean for his transgressions, but I will be the last person to condemn an entire community for the sins of one man. Or a few men in particular."

What happened in Konigsburg should have stayed in Konigsburg.

"The Empire was an engine in a car - it performed best when all its components worked efficiently. Such discrimination born from irrational fears and misguided prejudices weakens the engine. Purging skilled labor - doctors, soldiers, scientists - would only weaken recovery and national output.

To put in simpler terms, the Empire was like a piano. You can only create a good melody if you use both the keys. Using only one to the detriment of the other will only create music that could deafen ears."

"That… does not answer my question." Milicent blurted out before retreating behind her notebook.

"What the hell do you want me to say instead?" I forced her to reveal her face to me. "I have seen firsthand what scapegoating does to a nation! The right-wing fascist fascination with these conspiracy theories is a distraction - no one else benefits except those too incompetent to do their jobs. If we are to get anything done, we have to let go of these delusions!"

"I just want to know…if you like them?" she whimpered.

"I don't." I gritted my teeth. "I don't like anyone. Judean, Gipsie, Magyar, Dane - I don't care who they are! Just what they do. What they contribute to society. I was raised to be a soldier, to kill and die for my country. What is one meatbag to another? All are equally dead men in my iron sights!"

"So-"

"The Empire's fate was sealed the moment its leaders and people chose to believe in fairy tales about 'hidden enemies' rather than confront the reality of our predicament."

"I still don't understand," Milicent said meekly.

"Why? How?" I stared at her blankly.

For someone well-educated and eager to earn her promotion, she, above all else, should recognize the truth in my words. But all I see is a dumb expression on her face.

"Equality. Liberty. Fraternity. Do these words mean nothing?!" I nearly tore out my hair, uncaring if a crowd considered me feral. "The Judeans are the same as anyone else! They're people. All of us are! Just because I wish for their safety and good health does not mean I like them. I just want to respect them! Just as I want them to respect me. ME!"

"But if you don't like them, why would you help them?"

I had not felt the urge to strangle a person in public until now. What is she trying to accomplish? What is her motive in trying to loop the focus back to this stupid inquiry? I don't have to like a person to want to help them out. It's basic charity! Basic decency!

"That is a very selfish question to ask me, Milicent," I growled. "And quite frankly, I'm ashamed of you."

This is a question of basic hospitality. If a tourist goes to Japan, I want him to be welcomed and experience all that we have to offer. Provided, of course, that the tourist obeys Japanese law and shows deference to our customs. Given the recent trend of American tourists, I prefer

foreigners that are more educated and well-traveled than the uncultured pigs addicted to our media. Although I, myself, have no personal relation to a Judean in my past life, I would still welcome the man to experience my country and its culture like any person.

"I am sure you have heard of the Social Contract Theory?" I returned to wallow under the shadow of the Habsburg. "When a Magyar moves to Germania and lives under its laws, is that Magyar not a citizen of the republic?"

"Well…" Milicent muttered as she hastily scribbled my recent rhetoric.

"Yes," I answered. "And what does citizenship entail? Rights and privileges. So what if the Magyar is not an ethnic Germanian? He is our Germanic brother. He lives in harmony with his peers, works to uplift himself, and comes to his country's aid at a time of crisis. How do we repay such a righteous work ethic? Not with pitchforks and torches but acknowledgement of community and individual rights.

When the Empire was invaded, who answered the Kaiser's call? Was it just the Germanians? Or was it everyone in the Empire? The Yugoslavs, the Magyars, the Lothierns, the Pullskans, the Danes, the Lothierns, the Illdoan and Dacian immigrants, and the Judeans and Gipsies. They all wore the Imperial colors. We all fought, bled, and died in the same trenches. How can there not be solidarity? How can we deny these people equality and liberty under our republic when we have sacrificed so much together?"

"But the stories -"

"Are just stories. Contrary to what these pseudoscientific journals tout, criminality and treachery know no racial, ethnic, or national boundaries. To condemn an entire people for the actions of one guilty soul is both horribly stupid and extremely profane in the eyes of God. The most un-Christlike behavior came from Christians themselves; believe me, I remember the people who visited and donated to the orphanage."

Milicent smirked. "The Northern Illdoans would disagree on the first part."

"What do you mean?" I glared at her strangely. "Don't tell me even the Illdoans discriminate against themselves."

Oh God, are they?!

"Not like how us Americans do it." Milicent shook her head with a bitter laugh. "Northern Illdoans believe that Southern Illdoans are racially separate - inferior even - and make terrible soldiers, as seen in the Great War. They believe it was due to -"

"I'm going to have to stop you right there, Milicent. Give me a Southern Illdoan and I can train him to be a better soldier than a Northern Illdoan. Give me a division of Southern Illdoans and I

can train them to win battles. Make me the Queen of Southern Illdoa and I can make it just as prosperous as Lothiern or Daneland."

It's all about education and institutions. North Koreans aren't racially inferior to South Koreans; they're just communists. They are a kingdom of racist, warmongering midgets ruled by a fat, egotistical king because of their communist education, institutions, and political structure. If the Korean peninsula was united under a capitalist, liberal republic, then the people of North Korea would look no different than the people in the south. It's not a question of race or blood but government and the rule of law that creates a nation.

"South Illdoans aren't poorer and dumber than the Northerners because of who they are but because of the lack of financial and political willpower to uplift them from poverty. Negligence guarantees the prophecy to become self-fulfilled. Put a Southern Illdoan in a different environment that allows them to prosper and they will be a very different person than expected."

"So, to reiterate -"

"Can I answer a different question?" I ask sharply, wanting to just move on. "Preferably something more…relaxed?"

"Like Mary Sioux? Is there anything you can tell me about her?"

"Forget I said anything." I knock my head against the statue's base. "She is what you expect when you take a poor, naive, and pitiful girl and stuff her mind full of delusions of grandeur and vengeance, so much so that she will kill anyone and everyone that stands in her way without hesitation. Her unflinching faith in God made her a beast to be put down."

"Do you regret killing her?"

"No. I did my duty just as she performed hers. Would I kill her again? Always. The Great War was personal when I killed her father, but such is war. Sioux could have lived a longer life, a blissful one, if she had never put on the uniform."

"Did you learn where she was buried?"

"In the Legadonian Entente." I grumbled, "I shall visit her grave either as a tourist or a conqueror. Whichever the Legadonians will welcome me as."

"Do you enjoy killing?" Milicent finally regained her initial enthusiasm.

"No. No soldier should. It's the only difference that separates the men and women in uniform from serial killers and mass murderers. Unlike the criminals in Dacia, I try not to take too much pleasure in shooting my enemies. Fighting and commanding men was just a job; living through the Great War was a luxury."

"Did you enjoy the Great War?"

"Blood and all," I smirked. "Those eight years of death…I had never felt so alive."

"But you said -" Milicent looked down at her notes.

"I don't want to experience it again." I quickly cut her off. "I was so close to God. Never again. It was an adventure that should only be done once."

"Is that why you turned to politics? One last attempt to save the Fatherland?"

"Essentially. I hope that the Treaty of Triano would be a bad nightmare to wake up from for the people of Germania, but I suppose I was too optimistic."

"And Pullska?"

"It was for a wedding. I was the guest of honor, but I got conscripted into a conspiracy. I was overwhelmed by how quickly Pilsud resorted to a coup."

"Did you think it was by design?" Milicent pondered, "If Pilsud suspected that you would refuse him, would he have waited until the last minute to inform you of his decision and thus, take advantage of your hesitation?"

"Let's move on from Pilsud and Pullska. I prefer we don't talk about his putsch." I grimaced. "Give me a different question instead."

"Fine by me. Can we talk about Viktoriya? After all, you dedicated your memoir - treatise - to her."

"What about Viktoriya that invokes your curiosity?" I sigh.

"Who - or what - is she to you?" For once, Milicent presented me with a straight, consummate face. "I've noticed how your expression changes whenever you say her name. You tend to smile brighter, ever so slightly."

"She is the only person in the Imperial Army that didn't make me feel alone."

"Alone? But you're adored! The most popular girl in all of Europe! Everyone knows your name and sees your face."

"That is different." I murmured, "Throughout my life and career, I expect to live and operate alone. I make acquaintances and allies only as a means to advance my career in the military and politics. Given my strict adherence to competency, I expected to work alone."

Besides, my previous life was no different. Everyone knew me, but no one wanted to be around me. There were no celebrations in my name. No one came over for Christmas or my birthday. I was simply given a plaque or a piece of paper detailing my latest corporate accomplishments. I was content then; I had no reason not to be content being unapproachable in the Imperial Army. It just means fewer people are willing to sabotage my performance.

"Viktoriya was different. She was special."

"Special in what way?" the American leaned forward.

"I…well…you wouldn't understand." My mind suddenly drifted back to my last encounter with her. Was there something I could have done differently?

"I can try," Milicent replied softly. "I'm no stranger to such people, though not many have the same reputation as you…"

"Weiss is a good soldier; strong, sturdy, and diligent, while Neumann and Konig are proud, capable officers with exemplary skill and talent, and every man in the 203rd proved his worth a thousand times over. But they all still fell short for one reason or another." I huffed, glancing up to gaze at the clouds. "But Viktoriya…she was perfect. She was everything I wanted out of my training program. She was always there when I needed her the most. Viktoriya was just…perfect for me. Yet, if only I knew who she really was…"

"Does that mean that you and Viktoriya were-"

"We'll not discuss it here and certainly not now. Next question." I demanded.

"Addie confide to me what you had told him weeks ago," She began. "Do you really believe that you have been cursed by God?"

"No."

"No?"

"I don't need to believe." I snarled bitterly. "The evidence is overwhelming. I have been cursed the moment I was born."

"You were destined for greatness!"

"Without my consent. Look at all the men who were chosen by God: none of them lived safe and comfortable lives."

"They're martyrs."

"I don't want to be a martyr! I want to live! I want to enjoy life!"

"Then," Milicent continued cautiously, "Do you regret standing where you are now?"

"Regret? Where do I even begin?" I tried to laugh at her question for the silliness of it all.

"Who would you rather be instead? Scrap everything you have accomplished - forget the Great War, forget who Argent Silver is - what would you do if you had the choice to do everything all over again? From the very beginning."

I would never have joined the Imperial Army. I would never have met Viktoriya. I would be more assertive to be placed as far away from the frontlines as possible. I would flee to the Unified States to escape Europe. I avoid the politics and the insanity of this continent and live undisturbed.

Fundamentally, I would choose to stand far away from the curb of the train station. I would never have been reincarnated. I would still be in Japan, working as a humble salaryman, climbing my way through the corporate ladder. No war to worry about, no more questions about the Judeans, I would just live by myself content that nothing horrible will happen to me.

And yet…

And yet…

"I'm not sure I would be happy still." I grumbled, "To live without Viktoriya…"

"If you knew everything about her," Milicent hummed a silly tune. "Where she came from - what she did, would you still consider her a perfect soldier and subordinate?"

"I don't know." I hung my head and wrested my hair with my hands. "Why don't I know?"

"Is there someone else you imagine could fulfill her role?"

"I can't. I won't. No one else compares."

"Is there anything you wish to say to her if she was present with us?"

"Nothing that I had not already told her when I departed."

"Is there anything you wish to hear from her?"

"No. I want nothing from her."

"Do you love her?" Milicent's question forced me to look up and glare at her. The softness of her voice made it seem that she blurted it out by accident.

"I want to love her, but I can't ignore what she did."

To love is to change; to change is to be loved. What am I to do with her…?

"Final question, Frau Degurechaff, what do you want in your near future?"

"I want to be free. From here. From everything. I wish to leave."

Once my business in Yugoslavia is done and my reputation in the Progressive Bloc is restored, I will take Viktoriya and leave Germania as soon as the nightmare is over. We will go somewhere, anywhere but Europe. No more Junkers, no more boycotts, and no more illusions and secrets. I'll just work to end the fascist and communist revolutions before leaving the continent entirely. The Allied Powers may want me still, but we'll survive. We always do.

"Where is Richard? I don't think I saw him in the last couple of days." I spoke aloud as I boarded the train bound for Beograd, passing my luggage to an employee to stack on a shelf. "Does he still have the draft?"

"The draft is fine." Addie shrugged as he clutched his wife warmly. The couple felt it necessary to see me off on the next part of my journey. "We just hit a minor roadblock with the Osterrian publishers."

"They rejected it?"

"Worse, they wanted to negotiate. There were some passages too liberal and progressive for their conservative base and placed forward their own revisions."

"Censorship?" I huffed.

"They wouldn't say that but essentially." he nodded. "Richard chose the better option of publishing your book in Lothiern."

I suppose I shouldn't complain too much. The region, country now, remains a bastion of Liberalism and religious tolerance. Any philosopher, scientist, or activist that wants to publicize their works unimpeded goes to Lothiern. Loyal to the Kaiserreich but just as defiant. But I could have sworn that the November Boycott struck the country.

"Not even Lothiern was immune from the frenzy but it was also the only post-Imperial state that didn't report a single Judean being murdered. So there is hope." Addie smiled, "Besides, Ruth and I have considered traveling there for our anniversary. Meet with old friends and neighbors."

"Does Richard know a publisher in Lotheirn?" I inquired.

"Of course, Otho Francois. He moved his entire business to Amstreldam just recently. Didn't trust the Ostprogressives just yet. I plan to visit him and his family if we happen to meet again."

"Is he a close friend?"

"Yes, we met at a cafe by chance. He even bought a painting from me as a gift to his daughter, Annalise."

"Did you meet his daughter?"

"Only a couple times," he replied with a slight chuckle. "Very brilliant girl. You would like her. Last I heard from Otho, he gave his little girl a diary on her recent birthday for her to write in. Knowing the man, I suspect he hoped she would write something worth publishing."

"How fascinating," I remarked as I heard the final call for passengers, "Is there anything I need to be wary of in Yugoslavia?"

Addie was silent, contemplative, as he took in my question.

"Stay clear of the Ustase."

"Why?"

"They're thugs - very violent and ruthless - and do not trust Antonious Pavelich."

"Who is he?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Someone you should avoid at all costs. He is not worth negotiating." he frowned.

"I am not afraid of Pavelich."

"I know you're not. That is why you need to kill him."

Chapter Thirty: Follow The Narrative

It is true what they say.

War Changes People.

Viktoriya "Visha" Ivanova Serebryakov, the most brilliant, awful, and oblivious roommate Elena has ever had, Visha was extremely homoerotic for a heteronormative Orthodox reactionary conservative. Whatever Father - Dr. - Schugel told her, it was certainly not about finding the perfect male partner. It was perhaps the most confusing and surprising feeling for Elena, it is certainly rare to see someone defend their fanatical devotion to the same sex with the equal militancy as her Judean-hating Kievan parents. Men always touted women as the fairer sex, but not Visha.

She was a beast in heat, ready to ravage her love.

Why, Elena invited her fellow patriot over for the night with the full intention of seducing her as a game; a fun, shallow experiment for the White Russy if Tanya ever questions this event.

With roses, perfume, and pristine candles, the spymaster displayed herself on the bed in her full glory, enticing her friend to come closer. Any man would have immediately pounced and claimed the half-Judean like a lion claiming pride - anti-semitism be damned. Full breasts, a pretty face, and a pair of long legs transcended all prejudices and political machinations.

Perhaps Elena was more like her mother than she would have liked. Let's not think about the romantic adventures of her parents; it would only breed more questions than answers for Executioner Elena. Questions she would rather not entertain.

Visha, her dear friend Visha, drooled. It was as if her mouth were intent on reenacting the Biblical Flood in Elena's bedroom, the same bedroom that her parents once occupied. Instead of becoming a woman that night, the White Russy whipped out Schugel's Bible, a madman's interpretation of Faith and Science, and began to pray ecstatically at the foot of the bed.

If her bigoted father and mother were here to see it, they would be proud of their only daughter resisting temptation and choosing purity over wanton lust. Very proud, indeed. Shame she was going to marry a man instead of Tanya.

Men are brutes.

A true shame that she and Visha will only be remembered as roommates.

But the night was still young, and there were more games that the Reichsfuhrerin-KSA would like to play.

"Are you done yet?" Elena grumbled, her voice slightly muffled when her mouth rested heavily on her hand. "It's been 20 minutes."

She should start learning Kievan; at least then she would know what Viktoriya was repeating in her prayer. If she were more insensitive, Elena would have passed it off as Slavic lunacy.

"Can you at least cover yourself?" Visha replied, after ending her prayer with an 'amen,' "It is…improper."

"Visha, we're both women here. There is not a man in this house that could walk in on us. I already killed him."

"I know but…" Visha protested, her mind drifting back to how they had tortured and sliced up Tanya's assassin into several wet pieces before disposing of the evidence in an unmarked grave.

"But what, Visha? Am I ugly? Hideous?"

"No! No! I just don't want to compare Tanya's body with yours." Visha gulped, her eyes permanently attached to Elena's bosom. She felt her tongue licking her lips.

"Visha." Elena's voice dropped several octaves, She crept forward; the candlelit room seemed to darken at her approach. "What is it about Tanya's body that you prefer? You don't happen to prefer little girls, do you?"

Visha shook her head fervently. "No! NO! Not what I'm trying to say! I have no interest in those! I'm not one of them! I swear! Please-"

"Relax!" the spymaster laughed, shifting from her bed to put on a robe before blowing out the candles. "I believe you. It is very comforting to hear that. I have met too many soldiers whose taste in women did not grow up alongside the Argent Silver."

"I - um - don't want to know how you keep meeting them."

"Good." Elena sighed softly before turning on the lights. "Let's have some wine. And as a favor, can you liberate yourself a few articles of clothing? You're making me self-conscious in my own home."

"But-"

"Thank you for listening. I'll be downstairs."

What a strange transformation. Elena thought she knew people. How they think. What they desire. But with Schugel, he is bizarre. Not because he is a fanatic…but what did he say to

Viktoriya? What is he hiding? She was almost tempted to have Weiss raid his church in search of answers, but knowing what zealots do when cornered, Schugel would sooner burn the whole city down than let the KSA uproot his establishment.

And his obsession with the Argent Silver, the only scrap of information Visha was willing to share, was different. He didn't worship her like most people do; he regarded her as something more. Something greater.

To think that Executioner Elena's devotion was outdone by a freak of nature and former engineer. No one is more loyal than Elena. No one. Yet, Visha had expressed conviction when she had harboured traitorous doubts. Convictions that were reserved for idiots confident in their idiocy, but conviction nonetheless.

What happened to Viktoriya in that church?

"Left my dress coat on your bed, is that alright?" Visha's voice floated down the stairs like a melody, bringing with it benign comfort and nostalgia.

"More than alright." The spymaster tried to smile.

Jealousy governed the spymaster tonight. Elena was sure of it now as she regarded her friend like a flower waiting to be plucked. How lucky for Tanya to have such a beautiful, toxic chalice to drink from.

"Burgundian wine." She smiled at her guest, amused by Visha's reluctance. To add further insult, the Francois brand dared to depict Allied triumph over the grave of Argent Silver.

"Drinking the wine of our enemy…" the White Russy spoke ominously as her hands formed into fists. "I never expected you…you shouldn't."

"Stop me then," the spymaster challenged, pouring herself a glass before bringing it to her lips.

Knowing her propensity towards violence towards violent retribution towards the slightest defamation of Tanya, Elena expected to have her throat experience a cavalcade of glass shards in her throat. But Visha simply sealed the bottle before snatching the wine glass and drank the remainder of its contents. The Reichsfuhrerin gazed darkly at her peer, trapped between murder and lust, as her mouth slowly inched towards a disarming smile. Though Visha was only in her undershirt and black trousers, she was a true Slavic beauty, full of fire and ice.

"Can I make you some coffee instead?" the Slav offered with a polite grin.

"Why not? The Major loves your brew…"

Her eyes touched Visha's posterior, forever following her trail straight into the kitchen, while her mind calculated the risks to earn her friend's silence.

Control yourself, Elena.

Visha enjoys your company, but control yourself.

The Devil will return to claim her bride.

The gentle bliss between the two women vanished as soon as the front door emitted a series of loud, harsh knocks. It was as if a bear tried to break into the house and rampage through the living room. Viktoriya and Elena immediately grabbed a kitchen knife in preparation for a brawl. Communists? Rohrites? The Weimar Police? There wasn't enough time for Elena to change into more modest clothing before the lock was shot off to reveal three, no four, armed men in KSA uniforms. All with handguns pointed straight at Elena.

"Weiss?! Neumann?! Konig?!" Viktoriya shouted, completely shocked by her comrades' self-imposed invitation. In a way, her brothers-in-arms were just as surprised at seeing their favorite girl side-by-side with the Reichsfuhrerin.

"And me!" Announced the blonde giant.

"I'm sorry," the White Russy sputtered. "Who are you again?"

"Heydryck." He replied awkwardly. He came equipped with an illegal MP28.

"I don't believe we met." Viktoriya slightly shook her head.

"Degurechaff didn't tell you about me?!"

"Perhaps only in passing…"

"Was this a private affair, or can we join in?"

"Gentlemen," Elena huffed as she tied her robe together before displaying her hands in the air. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Staging a coup." Weiss blushed, trying to avert his gaze away from Elena's breasts.

"Does it have to be tonight?" The spymaster interrogated harshly, returning the knife to the display before pushing forward to meet her subordinate.

The men flinched as Elena's perfume engulfed their noses. A light but vibrant flowery fragrance that tugged at the hearts and set fire to the loins. Although she had spent years perfecting her

death stare to shrivel the morale of any man under her watch, it was alarming to see her gaze not affecting the mage veterans. Her hand moved to slap the defiance out of Weiss, producing a sharp crack that echoed throughout the house but only served to invite an immediate counterblow from the mage.

A punch delivered with such force that blood flowed from her nose, broke upon impact, and threw Elena onto the ground; her body presenting itself in the most humiliating display that the men's faces turned a bright shade of pink. The groans coming from her mouth indicated life remained in her lungs.

Only Heydryck seemed to enjoy the view.

"Wow," Neumann chortled, "I never seen you hit a woman before."

"Yeah," Konig nodded, "What would your parents say if they were here?"

"Sorry, Elena!" Weiss blabbered as he realized his action. "It was just a natural reaction!"

"Explain yourself." She groaned while her hands went to cover her nose.

"So, are we still going to kill her?" Heydryck inquired innocently.

"NO! NO! NO!" Visha dropped the knife and rushed forward to pick Elena up from the floor. "No one is killing anyone here! You're not killing my friend!"

"But we have to…" Weiss grumbled. "It's how revolutions work…right?"

"Why are you asking me?!" Visha was horrified.

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH?!" Elena screeched in frustration, trying to tear herself out of Visha's embrace. "AND CLOSE THE DOOR!"

Heydryck politely, quietly shut the door behind him.

"So, Visha…Elena," Weiss began as the group quickly occupied the velvet sofa, "We're committing a coup."

"You already told us that." The White Russy growled, "Get to the point."

"Do you know of Zettour's plan with the Major?"

The girls nodded.

"We were there…" Elena spat.

"And you know that I was considered the prime candidate?"

"Yes…" Visha's eyes narrowed like a tiger watching an unguarded cow.

"I have taken his proposal seriously -" Weiss could not get his final words out before the female mage lunged forward like a shell shot from a cannon with hands outreach to grip at his throat and strangle him.

The pair completely flew over the couch from the leap, nearly destroying the record player and the priceless glass table in the process. Konig and Neumann immediately got up to pry their battalion mascot from choking out their battle brother.

It seemed the perfume agitated her senses more severely than she let on. Elena silently considered passing a bottle to Tanya.

"TRYING TO STEAL MY WIFE?!" Visha roared like a thousand bombs dropped on Parisee. "ARE YOU TRYING TO STEAL MY WIFE FROM ME?"

Her eyes glowed like the sun.

I hope my Wilhelmina looks at me with those eyes. Weiss thought, his face turned slightly blue while his neck burned red out. She will be a lot more beautiful.

"That's enough." Konig reminded Visha as the two men pulled her back. Heydryck kept his gun aimed at the Reichsfuhrerin. "THAT'S ENOUGH! You're getting married to someone else. Didn't you tell us about your father?"

"What are your demands?" Elena inquired, allowing a brief yawn to exit her lips.

"Zettour wants to influence the KSA through Weiss," Neumann explained. "With it, he could control the youth that flock to our colors. He wants them to become good little Preussian conservatives."

"And?"

"And he wants you dead," Konig added. "With evidence."

"And are you going to deliver it?" Elena steeled herself for a bullet entering her head.

"I - let's negotiate instead," Weiss gasped for air as he climbed back onto the sofa. "I prefer that we keep infighting to the barest minimum to prevent drawing blood -"

"You clearly failed so far…." She pointed to her shattered nose most bitterly.

"My apologies." the veteran bowed his head, "It was unbecoming of an officer and gentleman to hit a woman…"

"So, what do you want?" Visha pestered.

"Autonomy." Weiss answered truthfully, "I would like for us to be separate from…Elena."

"You want to turn in your membership card?" Elena grumbled.

"Far from it. I do want to be part of the KSA, but I would much prefer if our martial activities were under its own department."

"You could have sent a letter." Elena huffed, wiping the leaking blood from her lip before signaling Visha to find the first aid kit in the washroom.

"You could have refused." Heydryck interjected, "Call this aggressive negotiating if you will."

"Very well." The spymaster nodded after a moment of silence. It is stupid to refuse now. "What do you want this…group called?"

"The Waffen-KSA." Weiss announced, "It's short and straightforward. You would still be Reichsfuhrerin but leave army matters to us veterans. Not to demean your lack of skill in managing us, but I prefer Tanya as our leader."

"The government will be forced to outlaw us entirely if we acknowledge our reformation into a paramilitary force." She warned.

"Let the traitors try," Visha stated, returning to her seat to stem the bleeding. "The republic is long overdue for an insurrection."

"Is that all, my brothers?" Elena bemoaned, "No? Then get out of my house."

"Hold on." Neumann spoke up, "Didn't we just agree-"

"I will implement your proposals next week!"

"That's good enough for us." Weiss smiled weakly as he got up. "I'll begin writing a list. Neumann, Konig, Heydryck - help me with the draft."

The men nodded before turning to leave, but Heydryck opted for one last chance to approach his superior. Instead of another demand, he hoped for more encounters with the brunette. Hopefully, somewhere more private.

"I'm queer," Elena grunted, brushing off his not-so-subtle advance before slamming the door on his face. "Find a different woman to punch in the face."

"How am I at fault?!" the blonde giant frowned. "That was Weiss!"

"I said I was sorry!" Weiss' voice pierced through the window before disappearing entirely.

"The damages to my door are coming out of your pay! All of you!" she called out after them.

Elena made another mental note to teach the noble upstart how to conduct a takeover properly. The idiot mage didn't bother trying to infiltrate her bureaucracy or win support among her agents. In a real putsch against a proper government, Weiss would have been chased out of Berun within 24 hours as the entire city and nation would go on strike. As much as she sought to retaliate physically, he was too valuable to the Major.

The Major appreciated him still. She'll ask questions. Too many questions.

What last-ditch effort to punish Weiss and his cohort before the rebirth of Freikorps Degurechaff, Elena did not know. She merely laid back to rest her head on Visha's thighs and let her friend apply ice on her face. The coldness stung most fiercely.

"Come," the Slav whispered gently, "Let us find a hospital for you."

"Wait," Elena raised her hand to caress Visha's cheek. "I'd rather stay here a little longer."

Visha blushed, turning her head away.

"I can't. I shouldn't."

"You can. You must."

"It's not right."

"Visha, look at me." Elena's hand gently tugged her friend's face towards her, "Look at all of me."

Visha did what she was told and gazed upon her ally with shameful, lecherous desire. Never had she seen her roommate so coy and vulnerable at the same time. Was it envy that Elena saw in Visha's eyes? Envy that she was free to tempt others? To have others desire her?

"We will make it right," she whispered, "The Major will make it right. As is her right."

The White Russy nodded slowly, too afraid to speak. But unfortunately, a sharp knock could be heard from the door again.

"Is it safe to enter?" A young man's voice came through.

"Get my clothes, but don't come down yet. Make yourself safe and ignore whatever conservation is happening downstairs." Elena softly instructed Visha, prompting her to quickly run up the stairs. Once she disappeared, the spymaster adjusted her robe before granting entry to her new guest.

Elena nearly forgot tonight's meeting, thanks to Weiss's idiocy.

"Heil Degurechaff - oh!" The man raised his right arm in salute before being taken aback by the bloody bandages on her face. He made no comment towards her night attire but instead moved to present her a briefcase.

"Guten Abend, Herr Hessen-Buhler." Elena huffed. "I hope for some good news tonight."

The man nodded most eagerly. "More than good news."

He opened his luggage to reveal a draft for a book, several inches thick and decorated with markings, a large envelope, and a written copy of an interview. Elena immediately determined that it was the dialogue between Degurechaff and that American reporter.

"Is the draft compromised?" Elena inquired.

"No." Hessen-Buhler shook his head. "She warned me that she will know if we try."

"So it is just the interview." She grunted in slight annoyance, pulling the copy from the briefcase. "Where is Caldwell?"

"Heading to Brussels, but I promised that I would meet her there in Gent, hence why I could not type another draft for you. However, I did manage to give a summary." He handed her the envelope. "Not my best work; she is…hard to decipher."

A minor disappointment, but it was for a good alibi; Degurechaff must not know.

"What did Heidler tell her?"

"To kill Pavelich. He confirmed it over the phone last night. He'll defend me if Degurechaff notices the time discrepancy…IF."

"Good. Good. The artist knows his lines well." Elena smiled, "Excellent work. You two have secured yourself a promotion within the movement."

"Anything for Argent Silver." He winked. "I would love to stay-"

"But you have a train to catch…I know."

Hunting that Fascist Croat will delay her return. A delay that the Germanian people are growing more intolerant of by the day. The blood she spills in Yugoslavia will fuel the engine that will bring down the republic. From the ashes of revolution shall the Empire be reborn. Violent. Untamed. Indomitable.

"Your payment will arrive in two weeks at most," Elena concluded, returning the draft back to the briefcase after glancing over the first few pages. Degurechaff's dedication was cute. Her eyes then turned towards the envelope. "Remember that I get the first book once it's published."

"As we agreed," Hessen-Buhler nodded again. "Don't worry. I won't forget."

"Good, now leave me to decipher what our dear leader has said this time. Enjoy Lothiern."

She watched him disappear into the night, granting her a moment of peace before reclaiming her spot on the couch and examined the interview. There was no need to alert Visha of it just yet. In all honesty, Elena was eager to listen to pearls of wisdom that came from Degurechaff's brilliant mind.

"No…No…NO… NO!" Elena's voice sounded gravely low before reaching a high octave. Her fists pounded the nearest wall, nearly knocking over her late mother's antique nutcracker that resided on the shelf. "No…Argent Silver…"

For the first time in her career, she finally realized what the word 'blasphemy' meant. What Degurechaff has stated in the interview left the half-Judean furious, confused, and angry that she was confused. The spymaster initially considered Hessen-Buhler of treachery, mincing the words of Germania's greatest war hero. But no, the man was smart but not smart enough to convincingly put his own words in Degurechaff's mouth. Like it or not, these were the actual words that came out of the Ace of Aces's mind.

"What happened?" Visha rushed down the stairs when she heard the thud. "Are you finally done? Can we go to the hospital now?"

The White Russy immediately spotted the dialogue resting on the coffee table before moving to get a closer look. Unsure if she was intruding on a personal affair, Visha looked back at her friend.

Elena did not bother to answer or turn her head to acknowledge anything.

This is not what she killed for. Not what she betrayed for. Not what she lied, cheated, and distorted for her own ends. This is treachery of the highest order.

The Major single handedly redefined what Germanian discourse be spoken daily; revanchist politicians big and small alike will have to tiptoe around the Degurechaffian Question.

Argent Silver thought she could take part in the largest, most deadliest conflict known to man, proceed to become a renowned mercenary for the Trianofied Empire, use her status and knowledge to catapult herself into mainstream politics, warp the arena to suit her needs, elevate and denounce political parties with a snap of her fingers, and simply leave?

No.

NO.

NO!

That is not how the game works.

Argent Silver…

You don't get to forfeit…

You're not leaving Germania - not leaving Europe. Oh no.

You're staying.

Your destiny is Germania. A duty to Europe.

You will stay.

If you still refuse your destiny…

Elena looked over to peek at Visha, watching her become enraptured by the Major's words.

If you care about her…you will stay.

If you care about the Judeans…you will stay.

Otherwise…they'll burn.

A smile slowly crept over Elena's face, her mind endeavouring to create the most imaginative ways to eliminate an entire culture. There is something about the Judeans that captivate Argent Silver, something deeper, she must know why. No one is that altruistic towards the Judeans, not even the Americans. Absolutely no one.

Everyone will burn. Europe will burn. Brighter and brighter evermore.

"Elena?" Visha asked softly. "Who is Tanya talking to? Who is the girl?"

"Someone who caught Argent Silver's eye," Elena muttered. "Caldwell."

"Have-have I been replaced?"

"It is a shame that Albo-American beauty has triumphed over natural Slavic looks once again…"

Visha's eyes flashed gold like a flickering light bulb succumbing to the darkness. Her fingers nearly tore the papers in her grip.

It was a tale as old as time…Mother Rus could not compete with the modernity of the West. Why settle for a Russy peasant woman with dirt in her hair and fingernails when there was a rich, well-groomed, erudite American city girl?

Why ride in a horse-drawn cart when the car is right there?

Tears trickled down Visha's cheeks as she continued to read in silence. Joy, sorrow, and burning rage escaped her lips.

"I can help you." Elena offered with a shallow grin. "I can help you win back Tanya's heart."

"You can?" Visha whispered like a ghost.

"I can. I know what she likes most about you. We just have to get her to see it."

"What does an American girl have that I don't? Money? A large business? Living in a mansion in - in Boston?! I can be rich too. I just-"

"She doesn't have your strength." Elena reminded her. "Display it and she will come."

"But how?" Viktoriya gumbled.

"I would tell you, yet to get the full picture of your power, I need to know what Father Schugel has told you."

"I-he-it is a secret."

"Visha, don't you trust me?" The spymaster approached the mage before climbing to straddle over her waist. With both hands, Elena gently cupped Visha's face and nudged the mage to look at her. Brown eyes meeting blue; their mouths just a couple of centimeters away. "I trust you. It's not fair."

"I do…but-"

"Tell me. Aren't we good friends?"

"We are, but -"

"But what? I want to help you, Visha. I can't if you don't share."

"I'll tell…you after we return from the hospital," Visha stated, pushing Elena from off her lap. "Get changed."

"I'll hold you to your word." She replied eagerly.

Chapter Thirty-One: Stay Strong, Viktoriya, And You'll Become The Commander

Meeting Schugel was providence.

How else could Visha explain the returning health of her parents?

How else could she explain her true destiny?

Destiny isn't found in gold bars and silver rings; it is found in Kievan soup and the bottom of vodka bottles.

The scent of boiled potatoes, radishes, and smoked herring flowed through the house like wind from the Black Sea; for a moment, Visha imagined the neighborhood outside was but fields of black soil all covered with next year's seeds.

She watched her father pry apart the bread with his calloused hands - hands that once gripped the saber which now hung over the hearth, hands that held the reins to keep his horse steady, hands that wrapped her in silk the day she was born - with a slow, deliberate pace before dividing the pieces between Visha and her brothers. All the while, her mother hummed an old Russy tune, Kalinka, as she moved with a ladle to pour soup into small bowls for her children. Her wedding ring was absent, traded recently for a pound of cold beef.

Grown as the three Serebryakov siblings were, their mother seemed to retreat further into the past.

"Father," Visha spoke up, realizing how barren his plate was, "What about your share?"

She lifted her portion in an attempt to split it in half

"Eat," he replied, not unkindly. "Dip it in the soup. The night is still cold. I don't want you to be thin like me."

No bullet, shell, or Siberian wind came close to eviscerating her heart compared to the cruelty her father placed upon himself.

In the moment, it was far easier to delude herself that the Russy Revolution never occurred. That this cramped, suffocating, dark bunker of a house - a tomb fit for their cause, was their family dacha in Eastern Kieva; let there be endless forests and tilled farmland instead of a concrete jungle.

Although her brothers tore into their dinner at a slow, leisurely pace, Visha pressed forward to partition her bread piece to her parents but the patriarch merely shook his head. The veteran

mage felt her mother's hand settle on her wrist, her skin warm and rough from constant labor, urging her to simply accept the meal as it was.

"It's all good." Her mother whispered, "We're doing good. You're doing good."

Despite the assurance, guilt hung over her like Damocles' sword as she regrettably devoured her meal piece by piece. The entire time, her father simply glared at her grimly, with regret and with sincere expectations. Only by occasion and the insistence of his wife, he would force tonight's dinner down his throat.

Visha only heard stories about what hunger did to a person. How parents ate their children, children ate their parents, neighbors ate each other. Her father's dedication was unparalleled; he boasted he would soon feast on his own fingers and give his flesh for his wife to turn into soup if it meant the family's survival.

Tanya, the Major, would tell Visha that it was God's cruelty that her parents still walked the earth instead of joining the millions of souls that perished in the blockade.

It was a silly sentiment. The White Russy girl has killed hundreds, thousands - tens of thousands - of soldiers in the Great War, yet here she was refusing to consider the possibility that she had to bury her parents at war's end.

It was by God's mercy that they were still alive.

Visha watched her father grumble and curse under his breath. As he shifted his stiff posture to be more relaxed, his chair groaned and creaked in all his movements. Even though the war ended years ago, he splattered his soup against his lips, eager to taste comfort. Her mother groaned in annoyance as she moved over to pass a towel for him to wipe.

Where did her father's strength go?

He was the strongest man she had ever known.

He had hunted bears alone. He had a hat to prove it, though it was stored on top of the dresser under a layer of dust.

Visha remembered the Judean grandfather whom Anatolii punched. She imagined it was her father's face being assaulted by a thug in uniform. Faith or not, she feared he would not survive the blow - he was too worn down to rise again.

"Father," She quietly said, "Do you need help?"

The question hung in the air like the smoke from his last cigar. In a heartbeat, she saw his former self - the father who'd lifted her onto his shoulders to touch the ceiling of their dacha,

who'd roared with laughter whenever she wore his oversized hat and robes-then his face hardened into stone.

"I don't want your help." He grumbled fiercely. Her mother's slap was immediate, a dampened spark. "Dammit, woman, I'm not dead yet! I can still pick up a - a spoon."

But he couldn't, not without spilling. The soup dribbled down his chin like rain falling against a window. Visha's nails dug into her knees; she'd faced artillery barrages with less dread.

The one time I want to be of service, I am rejected.

Is there nothing I could give to him?

"Want to go see the picture-show tomorrow?" Anatolli offered, "I heard there is a new film coming out."

"Bah! I don't care about these new Expressionist films," the old cossack shook his head violently.

"How about the art museum?" Kolya suggested.

"No! There is nothing but degenerate queer horseshit in these exhibits."

"You've only been to one. There could be something different this time around," the brother insisted.

"I know, and I don't want to do it again."

"Can we just eat before the potato soup gets cold?!" Visha's mother growled, glancing at both sides of the table.

Silence returned to the dining room, the serenity occasionally interrupted by burps and harsh coughs from the cossack patriarch. He used the edge of the table to slam open another vodka bottle, his second serving for tonight's dinner, though he was not entirely selfish with it; he poured half to fill Visha's mug.

The vodka bottle clinked softly against the rim of Visha's mug, a sound once celebratory, toasts to bountiful harvests, to the Tzar's health, to her 16th birthday, now reduced to shaky hands pouring liquid courage into the wretched silence.

"To your health and future," he muttered, though the blessing sounded more like a curse. The alcohol burned her throat, but the aftertaste was worse: grain famines and exiledom.

Visha, at that moment, would have preferred coffee, but there were dumber ways to incite fury from an alcoholic. She drank her share only to see her older brothers beginning to crack open fancy spirits; they completely skipped using the cups and instead copied their father's actions. Knowing them, they probably looted it from a vandalized Judean store or demanded it as "payment" for "protection."

The veteran mage drifted back to the Major's interview with the American girl. Degurechaff did love her, but how can anyone love a beast?

"Father." Visha sought courage from her memories in the 203rd and the Reichsbanner, "Why do you hate the Judeans?"

He regarded her question with a stink eye. As if his daughter were replaced with a lowly peasant masquerading as a Great War survivor.

"'Why?'" he repeated, "WHY?!"

"Honey, hush." the mother intervened, "Visha, dear, you know the answer…"

"I-I know, but I want him to say it," Visha replied solemnly.

"Ugh…" he departed from the table before returning with another vodka bottle. "I hate them because they are evil. Because they have killed our Tzar and burned our churches - I hate them because they are cowards, liars, and thieves! I was off fighting the real war while these Judean vermin hid in their homes. I HATE THEM because they killed my brothers and my mother - your grandmother…and they threw us out of our homeland. The Judeans deserve to be burned at the stake for the crimes they have committed against this family."

"But -"

"But what?"

"But wasn't that the Bolsheviks' doing?"

"What's the difference?" he huffed in annoyance. "Does that satisfy you?"

"Ummm…" Visha nodded slowly. "I suppose it does."

How come he could not see that it was the Allied Powers that were closer to killing us all than the Bolsheviks? Londonium has ruined him.

"Why do you ask-" Anatolii turned his head, flexing his bruised knuckles absentmindedly.

"Shut up." Visha quickly silenced him, causing her mother to pull her by the ear.

"That is not how you speak to your brother," the Kievan matriarch stated before letting go. "Apologize."

"I'm…sorry." Visha bowed her head. Her eyes turned down to her half-finished plate while her hands retreated to her sides.

"What was your question, Anatolii?" the mother interjected.

"Ummm…" he looked down at his little sister. "Nothing. It was a stupid question. Just forget about it."

"If you insist," she leaned back in her chair before smiling softly.

The family resumed chatting, throwing around stories and cheap jokes, while Visha sat quietly in her seat, continuing to stare down at the table. Her empty soup bowl refilled by the courtesy of her mother, yet the girl remained immovable as stone.

"Anatolli? Could you go add more wood for the fireplace? The fire is fading." Visha's mother requested.

"Lazy Judean laborers…" Her father stopped drinking to grumble under his breath. "Can't build a decent fucking chimney..."

Is there anything he won't blame on the Judeans? Visha thought as she made useless swirls in her soup bowl with a spoon. But how can she condemn him when she herself walked on the same path? Is this what it is like to be me?

Her eyes looked past her father and fell upon barren wallpaper behind him. He never bothered to hang new paintings nor put up the few remaining family portraits. This house was meant to be temporary; never meant to be their real home. Especially when the Whites were sure to unite and liberate the Motherland. All that decorated the walls in the house was a sole picture of the late Tzar Nikolas II - Saint Nikolas now - in all his water-stained glory.

What was it that the Major said about him? That they were worshipping a buffoon? An idiot who couldn't govern a village?

All that the Serebryakovs lived for, fought for, killed for…was it for nothing?

Were they destined to fade away?

How could this be?

Visha was - still is - the second most important person in the movement, yet she could not liberate her parents from the shadow of Bolshevism. She had power, yet she could not act upon it in a way that mattered.

"Father? Where's your sword?" she spoke out when she noticed the empty scabbard. It was his most prized possession; the blade that had defended the family from thieves and Communists alike.

The colors of the sheath were dull from time, decayed by failure and defeat.

"Sold it." He fumed. "To an antique collector. We needed the money to buy those fucking worthless government bonds. Damn the liberals. Damn the progressives."

"But-"

"We didn't need it anymore," her mother spoke quickly. "There's no more war."

"No more war?" Kolya questioned incredulously. "Look how many Judeo-Bolsheviks are walking around! The war never ended."

"Our war ended," she hushed him softly before looking at her husband. "No more war."

He sat silently still as his mind retreated further into his memories of brighter days in Tzarist Rus. "If only I was stronger…" he muttered repeatedly. "If only I was faster..."

"You did all that you can…" Visha told him. "There is nothing more you could have done."

"I could have done more…" he shot back. "There is always more I could have done…"

If only Tanya was here to speak to him…

What would she say?

How would she help him?

What would I say? Visha thought solemnly. How can I help?

If only she had the copy of Tanya's interview to share with her family, but Elena had filed it away in one of her cabinets. Since the American girl was a journalist, the dialogue would get its initial audience in the West - how unfair for her friend to hide something so profound. Running it through the newspaper in Germania before Caldwell set foot in America would arouse immediate suspicion from the Major and greater fury. As for the book that Elena so horribly teased, Visha would have to wait, like everyone else, for the text to be released in Holland.

But would he understand?

How could he when she herself could not read Tanya's mind?

What would the late Tzar say to his most loyal servant? Praise or censure?

The heir to the imperial throne only told her father what he wanted to hear - what the family wanted to hear - words that Visha so desperately wanted to hold as true and irrefutable. But upon remembering the words of anger and regret from the pages of the interview, she was yet to reconcile the two truths of her world.

Either Tanya was right or her father was right.

Except Tanya was always right.

She always was.

And her father?

Was Visha to look at him like one would a leper?

The same man who clothed her, bathed her, and escorted her to school in Kieva?

Could Tanya ever understand the love she still held for her parents?

Visha leaned back in her chair and looked to the side. There, on the countertop, lay an old mechanical clock, carved with the imperial double-headed eagle; broken, but one of the few relics of the old empire they still carried.

I want to burn this house to the ground. She thought. But where will we live then? Who would accept us if not Germania?

She already got her answer from the Junkers: demonstrably no one.

Albion had looked down on the Slavs since the Great Game.

Francia was too liberal and socialist to harbor Tzarist remnants comfortably.

America cared not for their plights, for why should they care about what occurred beyond the two oceans that surrounded it?

The Major wanted to be free. To leave all the sorrow and anger behind.

She was a dragon. She could always leave Europe to ruin.

But Visha, her family, were bears. Bears could not fly nor could they cross the Pacific. Bears hunted, raised cubs, and died in the same corner of the forest as all other bears before it. No matter how far west they could run, they would never escape the Red Army. They would always be hunted.

The Russy Federation will march again. It was only a matter of time.

It was cruel to wait for the gallows in this corner of Germania, but what more could her father do? He was but one starved man, too poor to even keep his sword.

But Visha could still fight. As long as she still drew breath, she would fight.

But for what, for whom?

The late Tzar? The new Tzar?

The conservatives who never cared for her?

The liberals who never understood her?

The socialists who never liked her?

Tanya did not care for the history of the Russy Empire - she would not bleed to redeem a colossal failure.

I could fight for God. Visha contemplated, drawing out a spoon that rested in her bowl. Fight for freedom and salvation. For a united and just Rus.

"Good news for you, my boys." The sudden cheerfulness in her father's tone reconnected Visha to the family dinner. He produced a propaganda leaflet and a weary map, "There are White armies forming in Manchuria and Mongolia under Baron Ungern. With Akinese guns and artillery, we could move to liberate the empire -"

"We?" Kolya coldly interrupted, "Father, how are we supposed to liberate Kieva with boat tickets to Asia? We can't trust the Dominion to hold its word. Besides, it will be a failed endeavor: they'll never get the men or material to succeed."

The map crumbled in the patriarch's grip. "You dare spit on the grave of Saint Nikolas?!"

"I would sooner dig his corpse up to ask him why the fuck we're exiled in the first place."

An empty vodka bottle was thrown at Kolya's face, but he tilted his head to avoid the blow. It shattered against the wall behind him, leaving behind a noticeable imprint.

"Treason!" the old cossack slammed his fists on the table. "This is treason."

"My love," Visha's mother placed her hand against his arm, "We can't go east. Our place is here. We just have to trust our brothers and sisters there to carry the fight without us."

"I should be there with them!" he fumed, "I should be there instead of guarding this…boy of a Tzar. I could at least die with honor!"

And leave us fatherless? Visha wanted to say. Mother needs you. She'll perish.

"Are we to dig trenches with our bare hands?" Anatolii asked rhetorically, "The Akinese are a thrifty folk. I doubt they would give us shovels."

"We swore an OATH to defend the Tzar and the imperial throne!" the cossack retorted, "Do words mean nothing to you?! We have a duty! A DUTY!"

He immediately turned to his daughter with a mad glint in his eyes.

"Visha!" He preened. "You are Degurechaff's assistant - secretary - whatever, you can talk to her - Argent Silver has influence in the government still, right? If she could just petition Chancellor Berning-"

"She can't." Visha's heart plummeted to the bowels of the earth.

She won't. She would have laughed at her father's face and called him a mad fool. An idiot. A horribly naive idiot.

"And the Chancellor is…not interested in helping us resist the Reds."

"This fight will have to be done alone, Father." Anatolii remarked, "We can only rely on ourselves."

"Damn it all." he groaned. "But no matter, there is still one thing we could do…"

"Wait." Visha spoke up, "There is someone else who could help us. Remember Dr. Schugel?"

"What about him?"

"He-" She held her tongue. It remains imperative that she keep his secret plans away from loose lips. Visha already told Elena; that was more than enough to expose the entire conspiracy. "Has ideas to help us. He has friends who could help us."

"What kind of friends?" Her father narrowed his eyes.

"Fellow scientists-"

"Scientists?" he spat, "Are we to rely -"

"We have no choice." Visha pressed, "I mean, it would be stupid of us to not consider the boons his associates could grant us."

"Where are these friends of his?" Visha's mother inquired.

"In…Osterry," the mage replied slowly. "I intend to accompany him, to represent our cause-"

"When?" Her father spoke up.

"Ne-next month."

"Absolutely not." He did not bother to look Visha in the eye but instead resumed his dinner meal, or what remained of it.

"Why?" She pleaded. "I could do it."

"Il'in will go with Schugel. He is the Tzar's advisor, after all. Your place is here. With us."

"No. No." Visha stood up from her chair. The air seemed to cool by ten degrees when she forced herself to meet her father's gaze. "I want to go. I must go with him."

"You can't."

"I will!"

"YOU WON'T!"

"WHY?"

Visha gulped. She broke her gaze to look for her mother's comfort, but there was only disappointment and scorn.

"You're getting married next week." Her father announced like a headsman. "We found a proper man to be engaged with you. He is strong, patriotic, and has connections to land and wealth in the Unified States. A union with him will restore this family to greatness and get us out of this hellhole."

No.

NO!

The veteran mage looked around the dining room, as if the Major would pop up from behind the curtain to kiss her and take her away, but there was no one else but cold stares and silence.

"What? How? When?" Visha protested, slamming her hands on top of the table.

Despite all his frailty, her father did not budge an inch in that moment. His face was as harsh as the Siberian winter and just as impenetrable.

"We have found brides for Kolya and Anatolli while you were prancing about doing who-knows-what with that Judean whore, and I intend to get all these marriage affairs concluded yesterday."

"I won't marry."

"Yes. Yes, you will." His voice seemed to grow with rage at her impudence. "Your brothers will give us sons and daughters, and you will give the Tzar a champion as great as the Argent Silver."

"I serve Argent Silver - the Ace of Aces!" Visha shouted, "I am the most essential person that she depends on! The ONLY person she depends on! My place-"

"YOU ARE MY DAUGHTER! You will do as I command, and you will marry Vladimir Nikolaivich Kurnakov." His face grew red as burning coals. "Your duty lies with your family, your Tzar, and your God. Not some Germanian tavern slut!"

"I AM NOT MARRYING!"

"VIKTORIYA!"

Just as she knocked over her wooden chair and backed away from the table, her father rose from his seat with fury and vigor of a man half his age. He swiftly dropped his utensils to grab his new walking stick, prompting sudden alarms from Kolya and Anatolii.

"Father," The oldest brother stood up to interfere. "Let's talk about this."

He quickly found himself collapsing into his mother's arms with blood trailing from his forehead.

"VIKTORIYA!" the cossack patriarch thundered, "GET BACK HERE!"

Visha didn't.

She retreated back into her bedroom, the last refuge for a child, and slammed the door behind her. Her entire weight was thrown against the wooden barrier like rocks stacked against a gate, the only security left was a bottle of vodka she had pilfered from her father's storage in the hallway. It wasn't before long when the door shuddered against the rapid pounding by her father.

"OPEN THE DOOR! NOW!"

His cane made dents in the wood, though it threatened to shatter itself.

Visha began to weep before popping open the bottle to drown her tears away. The liquid burned her throat as if she drank fire from the mouth of a flammenwerfer.

She was a soldier, one of the best, one who'd killed men great and small alike by the thousands. Yet tonight, Visha was the same scared little girl who was pulled out of the wreckage of her burning home all those years ago.

"IF I HAD KNOWN THAT YOU WOULD BETRAY YOUR FAMILY, I WOULD HAVE LEFT YOU IN KIEVA TO BE HANGED BY THE BOLSHEVIKS! MY DAUGHTER DIED IN THAT FIRE! DO YOU HEAR ME?!"

Visha could hear, even feel, her mother approaching. Yet it sounded like a skirmish on the other side. And a lot more shouting among her parents. She trained her ears to block out the din. The White Russy put the bottle to her lips only to find that she had already emptied it entirely.

"WHAT? YOU want to continue - continuing babying her?!" His father's words echoed in her mind, followed by a slap to her mother's face. Sounds of violence started to emerge, rocking the walls so vigorously that Visha thought Tanya would hear it all the way from Yugoslavia. "She is a SEREBRYAKOV! If she does not become a real Cossack, the Judean freaks will come in and take everything she owns until there is nothing left! WE cannot fight her battles anymore! She will do her duty to the Tzar, get married, and liberate the MOTHERLAND!!!"

The wet, squelching fire that lived in her belly exploded out of her throat, and she vomited over her uniform trousers and undershirt. The veteran wiped the excess spittle with her hand before staring out the window to meet the uncaring stars that decorated the night sky.

In her mind, Visha did everything right.

She did what Schugel told her to do.

She did what Elena told her to do.

The door jumped a couple of times before the heavy stomps from her father's footsteps returned to the table, leaving her in complete silence and despair. If she didn't have the foresight to stack

her own closet with a crate of vodka for a siege like this, Visha would have been forced to leave her sanctuary to wash her mouth and risk her father's wrath once more.

Like her father in his rocking chair, she drank and drank until her body rejected the ritual. More vomit, snot, and tears stained her skin and clothes.

Perhaps Visha did die in Kieva; she was just in denial. Like all White Russy.

"Oh Master, Lord my God, in Whose hands is my destiny, " She whispered, reciting a prayer from memory. "Help me according to Thy mercy, and leave me not to perish in my transgressions, nor allow me to follow them who place desires of the flesh over those of the spirit.

I am Thy creation; disdain not the work of Thy hands. Turn not away; be compassionate and humiliate me not, neither scorn me, O Lord, as I am weak. I have fled unto Thee as my Protector and God. Heal my soul, for I have sinned against-"

She broke down in tears halfway through as her voice struggled to finish the prayer. Visha searched for anything to channel her hope, but her room was barren of dolls, flowers, and books that other girls grew up with.

Her eyes eventually landed on a scarred nutcracker, one of the few toys that survived the revolution. It was a gift from one of her uncles - before they got killed. Another reminder of failure.

But as she continued to stare at the doll, something miraculous happened.

Its mouth opened, and it spoke.

"I have seen your tears and heard your cries, but worry not, for I will be with you. Grant me your burdens, your fears, and your sorrows, for I shall carry them for you."

The voice wrapped around Visha like a warm blanket.

"Go to Osterry. Go with Schugel. March forth and fulfill your mission. Call upon me once more and I will answer. Place your faith in the Lord and thou shalt succeed in all thy virtues.

Deus lo Vult."

"Deus lo Vult," the White Russy repeated. "Deus lo Vult."

Chapter Thirty-Two: The Blue-Eyed Cossack Girl

"So you're leaving?"

The sound of her father's voice froze Viktoriya in her tracks, hand reaching towards the front door. After deliberating for a few hours until midnight, she had dared not leave her room until now. A thousand emotions swelled in her throat as she was forced to turn her head to confront him. He sat silently in his wooden rocking chair with a lit cigar in his mouth and a loaded shotgun in his lap. Their eyes met and Viktoriya wavered when she saw pity and disappointment staring back.

"I can't stay here forever." Viktoriya replied, "This place is a shithole."

"It has always been a shithole." He huffed. "We were never supposed to be this far west. I still remember our estate in eastern Kieva, right on the Don River. Blue water and yellow fields as far as the eye could see. That was our real home, now and forever."

"So why the Empire? Why Germania? You've always hated its progressive and liberal ideology."

"I do, but we needed a place to hide, and this was our best bet."

"Was it worth it?"

"As long as I get to see you, Anatolii, and Kolya strong and brave, then it was worth it."

"Then you know why I have to go."

"Go where?" he growled. "To Osterry? To meet with Schugel? That man smells too Judean for my taste. I bet he steals money like one."

Viktoriya couldn't help but snicker at the last remark.

"Let me live my life, Father. I did everything you asked of me."

"Your life is with us, Visha. With your brothers, your mother, and your Tzar. You were such a good, loyal, and obedient young woman before you put on that Imperial uniform - and look at what the liberals have done to you! They made you queer. QUEER. A fucking degenerate and Judean slut. The Visha I raised would never associate herself with Christkillers and crypto-Bolsheviks."

"Time changes people," Visha whispered meekly.

"It sure as fuck did! War changed you and I don't know why! I don't know why you associate with Elena. I don't know why you love Argent Silver. I don't know why you stopped enjoying killing. Why? Why are you like this? What the fuck happened to you in the Great War?"

"I changed. I had to adapt or die."

"Adapted too much!"

"What do you want from me?" she retorted bitterly.

"I want my daughter back," he roared. "I want the Visha I know and love. I want the Visha I can hug and embrace and call my heir! You were taken from us! By the Judeo-liberals and socialists to be used as cannon fodder in the Great War. It broke your mother's heart! One lucky bullet and it would be the last time we saw our children. And look what happened to you! You're a freak. A monster. Used by the liberals to destroy God-fearing conservatives like me."

"I am still your daughter." A single tear fell from her eye. "I just want…to be more than just Visha. I want to be someone who matters. Someone who could do more than just be a Cossack."

"You do matter. You matter to us. The entire White Russy liberation movement."

"More than just them."

"Then who? Argent Silver? She does not care about you!"

"DON'T SAY THAT!" More tears flowed down her cheeks.

"I am OLD, Visha, not BLIND! I saw her chest of honors and I read your letters, each and every one of them, and I know where you keep your medals! All four of them. Argent Silver does not care about you."

"That's not true. THAT'S NOT TRUE!"

"It's the truth, Visha."

"NO! IT'S NOT!"

"THEN WHY DIDN'T SHE SPEAK IN YOUR DEFENCE?"

The immediate silence was damnation.

Visha stood silently by the door, wondering why Tanya did not notice the disparity. Was she distracted by the responsibilities of her role as Major? Perhaps she had written recommendations…yes! And Zettour and Rudensdorf are too bigoted to -

"You're just another dog to her, Visha." Her father shot down her imaginings. "Someone only to be trained and thrown away after a competition."

"No, I'm not."

"Then why did you get expelled? The way I see it, once you did everything she told you to do, she no longer needed you. And everything you did since then is a pathetic excuse to crawl back into her good graces. Which, may I add, you will never acquire."

Visha finally broke down and slumped against the door. She has served dutifully and faithfully by Tanya's side throughout the war; stood by her in Norden, Rhineland, and Dacia, and yet, where was Tanya when Visha needed help?

The Major fucked off to Osterry and Yugoslavia…and found a more interesting partner during the journey.

With a shotgun in one hand and the other empty, her father finally removed himself from his rocking chair to pull her off the ground and into a bear hug. His shaggy beard and routine breath of cigars and vodka filled her with an aura of calmness while her tears flooded his chest and shoulder. A cruel, wretched comfort, but comfort nonetheless.

"You don't have to go…" Her father hummed a soft tune, patting her on the back. "You can stay…"

"Where's mommy?" Visha whispered.

"She took the boys for an emergency prayer at the church. Leaving me to talk to you. Her orders, not mine."

Both Serebryakovs shared a small chuckle.

"You know," he began softly, "I heard you played cards while in the army…is that true?"

"Yes." Visha nodded slowly.

"You gambled?"

"Yes."

"Did you win?"

"Always."

"That's my girl."

"Learn it from you." Visha matched her father's smile. "Uncle Stas taught me a few tricks."

"That coy bastard." He chuckled bitterly but joyously. "I knew he would…"

The praise was real but it was heavy as stone and just as cold. But Visha didn't care and so she embraced the ice to be the warmth of fire. Winter is Spring. Summer is Fall. Holy Rus is Communist. Europe is dead. Long live Europe.

And yet…

Just behind her father, Visha could almost just see Tanya standing still as she was in the Rhine and her office, rigid and unyielding, while her face was expectant and furious. Her blue eyes are merely shrouded by the shadows cast by the dim lamp light.

You Are Pathetic.

"Father." Visha quietly pleaded. "I have to go. I need to go."

"I don't want to lose you again," he replied, gripping her tightly with his free hand as if she were to dissolve under the gaze of the pale moon. "I lost too much already."

She gently pushed him away.

"Please stay. You don't have to do this."

"It's God's will. It must be done."

"Can't we talk it out?"

"No. Not anymore."

"That's a shame…" He moved to check his shotgun, clicking it open to see it still loaded. "At least help your father out tonight. I feel there is no sleep within me tonight."

"Help with what?" Visha was almost afraid of what he might say next.

"Hunt."

Though she had seen the best and worst expressions of the Major, not even Tanya's smile carried the ominous cruelty of her father's. His teeth, yellow and stained, resembled fangs that belonged in a grizzly rather than a man.

"No." The young Cossack immediately shook her head as she grabbed her suitcase and the doorknob. "No more hunting."

"Visha." Her father's voice grew tense. "I wasn't asking. It was an order."

"Father, please, don't make me do this." Visha wanted to push him.

With her strength, it wouldn't require much effort. Punch him in the face and break his nose.

Kick his shins.

Jab his belly.

Her suitcase was rather heavy with clothes and amenities, but it was more than adequate to slam into his ribcage and rupture his heart. It swung slightly at her side, tempting her most maddeningly. Just one wide arc. But her mother's remorse flashed before her eyes.

Killing came easily to Visha.

She didn't need a reason to do it.

The act of killing was justified in and of itself.

But not her father.

Anyone but her father.

Her mother did not deserve to be a widow.

Visha felt her father's calloused hands grip her neck and forced her out of the house. So close was he behind her that every few steps, the barrel of the shotgun poked at her spine or brushed against her hair.

"What are we hunting?" Visha kept her voice low, sneaking glances at every street corner and alleyway. There were no police patrols at this hour it seems.

"You know the answer." The last vestiges of endearment gave way to a monstrous veneer of eagerness. "We're Judenjagers."

"This - this won't make us happy. It won't fix our problems."

"I disagree. Whenever my father and grandfather were sad and miserable like us, they went out hunting. They taught me how to find tracks, where they congregate, and how to collect trophies."

"Father." Visha stopped and turned around, only to be dangerously close to the double-barrel shotgun aimed at her forehead. "Please, we don't have to do this anymore."

He frowned.

The cold steel tapped against her skin.

"Keep moving. I know a spot."

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True to her father's word, the pair found a lone blonde Judean woman, either a waitress or manager, returning to her home after locking the front door of a restaurant. She didn't have time to scream for help when Visha's father dragged her into a dark corner of an alley and slammed her head against the brick wall.

Her glasses immediately fell onto the ground and were immediately crushed underneath a heavy boot. Dazed and confused, she tried once more to hear her own cries, but that was only met with further assault. She continued to feel blood dripping down her scalp and leaking out of her nose and mouth.

Younger, weaker men would have relied on brass knuckles to maximize their punches, but Visha's father was above such handicaps. 50 years of pure, unmitigated hate flowed through his veins and he left the young woman with a broken nose, a ruptured eye, a split lip, and missing teeth.

"As a Cossack," the White Russy patriarch grunted between each swing of his arms, "You have to be tough, strong, and courageous to punish the animals beneath you. Kill or be killed. The old, the lame, and the stupid will perish from our lands…"

"Please…" The wounded girl begged for her life; her tears mixed with her blood. "Take whatever you want…just let me live. I won't tell anyone."

"See what I mean, Visha?" he snarled bitterly, "They are nothing but scum and parasites preying on the softness that lives in the hearts of men. This earth belongs to God's chosen. Not the Muslims who denounced the Tzar, not the Buddhists who disgraced our culture, and certainly not the fucking Judeo-Asians who sank our fucking boats."

Once it was clear that she was too wounded to flee, the Cossack finally got up to turn towards his daughter. Visha, armed with her father's shotgun, was frozen, distant, and dead. She simply stood as still as a pillar with unblinking eyes and a pencil-thin frown of bloodlust, terror, and remorse.

"Be a good daughter and shoot her," he commanded. "Shoot her now."

"Mercy…" The young girl whispered, raising her bloodied hand towards Visha. "God save me…"

Neither of their words reached her.

The world had narrowed to the shotgun in her hands, the coppery smell of blood in the air, and the face before her. The stranger's features blurred, warped, and distorted into something worse, something intimate. The broken nose became familiar with sharp angles. Bloodied lips thinned to a disapproving line.

Visha stared and saw Tanya's visage, wounded and vulnerable, as if she had crash-landed from the Rhine. But it wasn't the help that Argent Silver wanted.

"You hesitate now?" That cold, judgmental voice rang like bells in a church, louder than any artillery battery. "After Norden? After Arene? After November? SHOOT ME!"

The calmness in the specter's voice disturbed her.

Where was the rage? Where was the fury? Where was the fear summoned by her words?

Visha was a loyal girl. A loyal servant and soldier. There is nothing that she would not do for the Major.

But here, if Tanya ordered her to be her executioner, would the Cossack girl do it?

The shotgun trembled not out of fear but recognition.

The ghost was right: Visha never faltered ever since her training regime.

So why the pause?

Visha blinked and saw the mirage return to the young woman's face. The wounded girl was silent, her one good eye, as blue as the North Sea, stared directly into the White Russy's soul. A desperate gamble to search for a single flicker of hope, of mercy, of humanity that still remained in the Great War veteran.

The groveling should have ignited rage in her heart, just as her father taught her, but instead, there was only pity. For the stranger and for herself.

Is this truly the path to rise and be greater than anyone else? To be superior?

To be more than someone else's weapon?

But the Great War…the blood, the death, the carnage…it was all beautiful. It was glorious to be on the battlefield. The thrill of combat and the risk of death at every second. The ballet of bayonets, the symphonies of cannon fire, the acapellas of the dead and wounded falling from the sky.

Looking back now, the medals were meaningless, unnecessary even. That war was a glorious adventure to behold. To experience the opportunity that occurs once in a generation. To be a real killer of men and women. The weak perish so the strong may live.

Why pretend otherwise?

After all, her experience in the Great War wasn't that bad.

Why not just be Tanya's gun? Life would be so much simpler if she just stayed content.

Visha blinked again and Tanya's face reformed again.

"Shoot Me!"

The White Russy fired and the shotgun kicked.

There was once a time that Visha would have pissed herself at the thought of killing anyone, civilian or soldier, much less force a gun against their head. In that moment, however, she felt nothing.

She wanted to feel joy. She wanted to feel shame. But there was nothing her heart could latch onto.

All that remained was a terrified face and next to it, a bullet hole in the concrete.

"How shameful." Visha's father growled in annoyance, snatching the shotgun out of her hands before firing the next shot into the young woman's head, silencing her weeping for good. He then knelt next to the corpse to pilfer through its pockets and purse.

The cigarette carton and matches he kept, pulling one out to light and stick into his mouth. The identification papers and apartment keys were immediately tossed. Next were the worthless family photos and other knick-knacks.

As for the wallet, just a few Reichsmarks and some coinage. With the inflation ruining the country, there wasn't enough money to justify the two bullets. Still, he claimed them for himself as well as the ring, necklace, and earrings. Wash away the blood and they could be resold or serve as a new present to his wife.

"You aim for shit, Visha." He finally grunted, calmness finally returning, "But this was a good hunt. Let's go home."

He turned and found that his daughter and her suitcase were missing.

"Visha?" He looked around confused. "Where did you go? VISHA!"

Within the walls of a phone booth, there was solitude. The dim light flickered like a torch resting on an island in the sea of silent despair. With a heavy heart, Visha offered a few coins to the machine, each one carrying a face: one for the dead woman, one for her father, one for herself, and the final one for Tanya.

A thousand artillery shells would have been a preferable sight than this machine.

For the first time, she deserted her station. Abandoned her duties. A renegade to both Holy Rus and Germania. Visha abandoned him - abandoned her family. What would her ancestors say to her? Seeing this blatant treachery.

With a finger, she spun the wheel, one rotation after another, as each revolution marked a calamity, and waited.

And waited…

Finally, the call was reached and Elena's voice, ragged and angry, was heard from the other side.

"Do you not know what time it is?!"

"Elena," Visha whimpered, "It's me. I need a place to stay."

"You have your apartment, Visha! Just go there-"

"I can't. I'm not ready…Please, I need your help. You are all that I have left in this country."

A long pause.

"Fine, I'll see you at my front door. You know where I live?"

"Yes-"

"Of course you do. See you there."

The line went dead and Visha gently laid the phone back to its resting place.

She punched a hole through the glass before leaving, only to be halted by a pair of armed street thugs. A red armband with a white circle depicting a black swastika revealed their loyalties to Rohr.

"A little late for a Slav like you to wander around in our streets…" One of them smiled, though his eyes displayed only contempt and scorn.

"There are too many of you infesting our country - stealing our labour." The other remarked, "You need to go back to Rus, like all the other scum."

Visha's vision, once faltering from collected tears, snapped into clarity. Two Lugers in their hands and two daggers in their belts, while their beige uniforms were tainted by past skirmishes and assaults.

"Wait," One of the Vanguardists chuckled, "Let's have some fun with her first."

"You're right, there's an empty alley we can use," the other remarked, "Why don't you accompany us?"

A heavy suitcase to the face as Visha's reply, its weight and sturdy build connected with a wet crunch of cartilage - the lead Vanguardist's smile exploding into a red canvas of avant-garde.

In the distance, a window was immediately closed shut.

The other thug screamed in outrage and bewilderment before immediately aiming his pistol at Visha's head. He pulled the trigger, the gun clicked, but no bullet came out.

A misfire.

"What?" The Brownshirt screeched, now consumed by pure panic. He didn't get a chance to curse his ill fortune when the White Russy grabbed his necktie and pulled him face-first into the glass wall of the phone booth.

His face was immediately marked by shallow cuts, while the phone booth had another noticeable, bloody imprint. His gun fell to the ground when Visha slammed his face against the wall once more, showering his eyes and ears with a thousand shards piercing his skin. The thug tried to flee the scene, but he only succeeded in allowing her to dig her nails into his eyes.

He screamed but Visha did not relent.

She continued to press forward until she tore out his eyeballs. Two orbs of white rested on palms soaked in blood. Only then did the screaming dissipate into mild whimpering. After crushing his eyes into a wet slurry, she broke his arms, dragged him by the necktie, and laid his head against the ledge of the sidewalk with his body spilling onto the street like a butchered lamb.

With her suitcase as Thor's Mjolnir, Visha raised it above her head and swung it down with the fury of God.

Odyn. A sickening crack as his jaw shattered.

Dva. A loud crunch was heard when his nose disappeared into his face.

Try. His skull collapsed like a rotten melon, bone fragments embedding themselves in the leather of her case.

When she finally stopped, nothing but blood remained; nothing but blood and brain matter seeping like porridge from a leaking bowl.

As for his partner with a ruined jaw, Visha grabbed his knife and sliced off his nose to see if he was still alive.

His eyes shot open in an instant from the rush of pain, and he tried to retaliate. She ended his resistance by jamming the knife into both his armpits, paralyzing his limbs from severed nerves. Visha unwrapped his belt and tied it around his neck, tight enough to crush his windpipe and leave him in a slow, agonizing death.

The White Russy then looted their weapons and their money, but left the cigarette box and photo of his girlfriend in his hands before she stepped over the man and continued on her journey to Elena's house.

It felt like an eternity but Visha eventually arrived at her friend's house. The door swung open immediately before she could even announce her arrival. She noted that there was a new lock on the door and Elena was dressed more conservatively than before.

The spymaster looked up and down at the White Russy, taking note of the blood on her hands and suitcase, as her hand hovered for a second to gently touch the White Russy's cheek.

"I am too tired to care." Elena huffed suddenly, giving way for Visha to enter. "The shower is upstairs and my bed is big enough for the two of us."

"I can sleep on the couch," Visha muttered, not wanting to intrude too much.

"I am not giving you any blankets and you've seen me naked," she retorted harshly. "You're queer, Visha, we both are. Just get over it."

Without another word, Visha locked the door behind her and followed her friend up the stairs. The White Russy showered, got dressed, and joined Elena in bed. Their hair neared entanglement, producing a brown swirl between the two pillows.

"Is this about your parents?" the Reichsfuhrerin huffed.

Visha nodded.

"Want me to remove them from your life? Permanently?"

"No. I still love them…I just wish that-that…"

"Suit yourself. I don't understand why you need them."

"Is there something wrong with me?"

"No." Elena moved her head to face Visha, "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know."

The brown-eyed brunette continued to glare. "Don't get comfortable being uncertain, Visha, that is how your precious Tzar got executed in a basement."

"Do you not regret losing your family?" the cossack whispered.

"I smashed my father's head in with a hammer. I strangled my infant brother with my bare hands in front of my mother. I killed her last for being a weak and cowardly woman. I don't regret anything and neither should you."

After a moment of pervading silence, the White Russy wept once more, crying out for the Major to return.

"Christ!" Elena groaned, throwing her head back on the pillow in flummoxed resignation. "I'm going to kill Tanya…"

"What? WHY?!" Visha looked up in utter shock.

"'Cause I think I would be a much better partner than her."

"You…you also think that she doesn't care about me, the two of us?"

Elena's mind flashed back to Tanya's interview and Hessen-Buhler's summary. A smile, full of disappointment and misery, crept over her face.

"She doesn't care about anyone," the spymaster grunted, "Tanya only cares about what Tanya wants. We're just pawns in her game. Something to be used and thrown away while she gets a laurel crown placed upon her head. That's her desire: the glory and the fame of always being superior to us mortals. Leaving us in the dirt while she ascends into heaven."

"What do we do?" the Cossack softly mourned.

"Nothing. We're in too deep. We burned all our bridges to endorse her. We are but kindling in her pyre; might as well burn bright for all of Europe to see. We just need her to get that throne…maybe, just maybe, things will be different."

Visha thought for a moment.

"Why not come with me to Osterry?" she offered sincerely.

"I would love to but my place is here, in Germania, as someone has to keep that fucker Weiss on a short leash. Chancellor Berning now has reason to arrest us because that idiot and his gang of idiots. We're criminals, Visha, outlaws. We're already dead."

It's either a trial or a ditch that awaits us.

There's nothing we can do but move forward.

If Tanya wants to leave, that's fine. We'll just create problems that only she can solve.

Author's Note: After 30 chapters, I understand the need to adjust the summary to be something different, in the near future. The next chapter, 33, will have some levity to offset the heavy subject matter in this chapter.

Chapter Thirty-Three: What Has The Empire Done For Us?

"Is this everyone?" Antonious Pavelich growled. He did not spend four years in man-made hell fighting for a Kaiser he did not love, for a country that occupied his home, only to sit idle like a maid waiting for her master to spill tea over the tablecloth. He kissed the asses of the Illdoans and the Magyars for weapons, for fundings, and the secret training camps. Just once, he would like to have a breakthrough for his plan of a free and independent Croatia.

His words sparked a snort of laughter from his ally in this affair. Stej Radikan was a round, pudgy man with a receding hairline, walrus mustache, and a paintbrush goatee. Though they were fellow patriots unified under the Croatian cause, Pavelich looked at him with barely disguised disdain.

Radikan was a moderate, a weakling, who dared to try to make compromises with the Serbs of Beograd. Autonomy was not good enough, less than desirable even, as it would change nothing. The Croats, his people, would still exist under the thumb of the Serb King and its illspawn. Only a complete separation of his homeland and Yugoslavia would satisfy the Ustase founder.

"What? You want more?" Radikan raised a curious eyebrow, "Shall we postpone and invite the Bosniaks too?"

Pavelich swiftly nodded his head in refusal.

This is meant to be a private affair.

He did not have enough Ustase to act as bodyguards for this meeting.

Though there were more men available, he would not be opposed to the idea.

Bosniaks are Croats in all but name. Papal brothers through and through and certainly not in any circumstances related to Serbs.

Regardless, Pavelich continued to look on as a few hundred men and women, secret representatives of Croat towns and villages, claimed their seats. Though, he occasionally glanced upward to gaze upon the Papal crucifix hanging overhead.

It was fortunate that the Illdoans had allowed them to borrow a church for their congregation.

Per the agreement, Radikan spoke first to ease the crowd. He settled them in with brief words, a prayer, and a few anti-Serb jokes. Though his following rhetoric was more galvanizing, Pavelich rolled his eyes in disdain. Once again, that oaf was leading his brethren down a path of misery and disappointment. Independence is gained through blood and iron, not olive branches and wine.

He was the one who would lead Croatia to greatness. To Greatness! Only he could deliver the promise of salvation. With the Ustase as his army, it could be done.

Pavelich rose when his partner returned to his seat. He carried himself like a knight on horseback and stared into the clapping and cheering crowd. He imagined himself in a larger assembly with an audience that followed his every word.

That day would soon come. He just needs to do more work.

"My brothers and sisters," He spoke aloud, his lungs made of brass, "As Radikan had alluded to, we face a new existential threat: the Devil of the Rhine has come to Croatia. She seeks to undo our identity and destroy our nationhood."

Prior to Triano and the formation of Yugoslavia, the Duchy of Illyria had ethnic Germanians as 12% of its total population. 12% too many.

Once his program to purify his country of Judeans, Gipsies, and Serbs have been finalized, the Germanians too will have to be eliminated from Croatia's borders. Through any means necessary…

The Devil's presence would inspire the Germanians to rise up and reunite with their northern kin and thus, put his entire life's work into smoke and flame.

"Do not listen to her words. Block out her voice! Heed not her promises. For too long have our lands been ruled by foreigners from the North, South, West, and East. Our farms, our forests, our mountains and coasts, have been plundered, razed, and desecrated. Our fathers and our fathers' fathers have been enslaved under the harshest tyrannies and subjected to the worst trials. God bless their souls for enduring the pain. We were forced against our desires in wars and crises, to be subject to unequal laws, and made to endure humiliation daily…"

On and on, Pavelich ranted, shouted, and bellowed. He spoke of the horrors of Isonzo, witnessing hundreds of his Croat brothers die undignified in trenches and machine gun fire. He rallied against the Judeans, the Serbs, and the false state that was Yugoslavia. Nothing but rage and contempt carried his words to the listeners.

Pavelich promised fire and retribution, death and murder, for every slight against the honor of his beloved country. By the time he was done, only Radikan looked on with sheer horror and bewilderment. He tried to speak up but found an Ustase hand placed against his shoulder, urging him to remain seated.

"The She-Devil, Our Satan, must be opposed on all corners, on every street, in every house, for our dream of an independent Croatia to be achieved. The Serbs will be removed from our lands, that is guaranteed, but we must ensure that we do not trade one tyranny for another. After all, in

four centuries of foreign rule, what has the Empire ever done for us?" Pavelich ended his grandiose speech with the desire to see his peers reflect and understand his movement.

The Germanians only cared about themselves. They offered nothing to the Croats for their loyalty.

The Serbs may call the Ustase terrorists, but for Pavelich, they were liberators. No measure was too great, no act of revenge too small. Destroy the monarchy and self-determination will follow.

After a few moments of silence, one hand was raised from one brave man. A fellow veteran of the trenches judging by his scars carved over his face.

"Jobs?"

Pavelich blinked. What did he mean by jobs?

The crowd murmured in agreement.

He supposed he could give the Empire credit for creating an environment that allowed his career as a lawyer to flourish. The 1920s were a golden age as he fought for the labor rights and environmental protection of his Croats and Croatia's natural beauty against the corrupt and predatory Imperial conglomerates. Without Imperial presence, it would have been considerably more difficult to acquire the fame and notoriety as a patriot.

"The railways." Another spectator blurted out.

The Imperials do love their trains. Pavelich internally rolled his eyes. Though, he still remembered how cheap tickets for first class was back when the Empire was united. Before the Great War.

His wife always wanted to see the windmills and tulips in Holland and given the rate, they could afford to tour the entire Kaiserreich and did just that.

"Public welfare and workers' compensation." A woman called out, causing a wave of endorsement.

Pavelich ground his teeth. Memories of his parents' injuries flashed before his mind. They were railway workers, laying tracks throughout Bosnia and Croatia, and risked accidents daily, yet always rewarded generously by the Imperial state whenever they suffered a splinter.

"Urban sanitation." An elder said gruffly. A wave of laughter followed suit.

"That's the one thing I definitely missed when the Empire fell!" One worker in a pale, beige beret howled in his seat. "Let's face it, the Germanians are the only ones in Europe who can keep a city clean. The Serbs can't operate a broom and a dustbin! Much less a kingdom."

"Cultural freedom and individual expression." Another woman spoke up.

Pavelich's eye twitched. Of course, a feminist had to infiltrate his meeting to dismantle the Yugoslav state. Can't these women recognize that national liberation and nation-building are a man's job? The lengths these suffragists go to just to be heard.

Yet, she does have a point.

Unlike the Empire, which remained content collecting taxes and tithes to their bureaucracy and army, Yugoslavia is a Serb ethnostate disguising itself as a Southern Slav pan-national federation of kingdoms. In the classrooms, courts, and government offices, everything had to be Serb. Everyone had to speak Serb. Everyone had to worship God like a Serb.

It's all suffocating. His people can't prosper under such a regime, hence the righteous need for violent retribution against the Serb monarchy.

"Education?"

Try as he might, Pavelich couldn't find a bone to denounce his professors or the curriculum that had prepared him for his career as a lawyer.

"Operas and the fine arts?"

"Museums and castles."

"Cars!"

"Market access to all of Central Europe, allowing our products to be shipped to our customers under a single, unified regulatory body?" A well-dressed gentleman raised his hand. "We didn't get tariffs when we sold our wares Magyars and Osterrians."

Damn the trade war. Croatian exports plummeted by 95%, or so Pavelich heard, thanks to the tariffs being thrown around between America, Yugoslavia, Magyarozag, Osterry, Magna Rumelia, Ildoa, Dacia, and the Bulgar Tzardom. No one in Croatia can make a single damn profit!

"Oktoberfest?"

Pavelich looked a lot less amused at the mention of that Germanian holiday. That remark caused the entire church to explode in jeers and frustration while Radikan bellowed with

laughter. That was the biggest gripe, a thorn in every Croat community, when the Serbs banned Oktoberfest in their Serbification of Illyria. A month where every Croat has the perfect excuse to get batshit drunk, drowning in beer, spirits, and wine and not get judged by the consummate Imperials, and now it is all gone.

Instead of a holiday in each month of the year, based on the quirks of each region of the Empire, Croats can only get drunk in the streets two times per annul. Assuming they found enough cheap beer to drown their sorrows to cope with their new reality.

The Francois boasted that they had four hundred varieties of cheese and the Imperials responded by having five hundred flavors of alcohol. But thanks to the tariffs and Serb hatred of all things Germanian, the beer palette for Croats have dropped to a meager dozen. Perhaps even less as several respected breweries have shut down due to economic woes.

Pavelich may not be a drunkard but October with his wife was noticeably more sober and depressing since the signing of Triano.

"Films and Music." A younger man remarked. "I enjoyed the re-release of Metropolis. The actress was amazing."

"Is the movie good?" Another audience member acquired. "I haven't seen it yet."

"It's excellent. The addition of sound has really enhanced the story tenfold."

Pavelich pounded his fist on the podium to regain the assembly's attention; his bitterness reaching a new peak. His brethren are supposed to denounce the Empire as a colonizing power, not be nostalgic for the early 1920s.

"Germanian chocolate," came a voice from the far corner of the church.

Now that was something everyone missed when the Empire collapsed. Rhenish chocolate was the king of Europe, no matter how much the Waldstattens claimed theirs was superior.

"I actually enjoy Flemish chocolate." One man spoke up. "I still think it was the most excellent candy in the Empire."

The remark prompted immediate reaction from a peer who sat behind him, one who proclaimed his loyalty to Walloon chocolate.

"You're a heretic!" he thrust a judgmental finger at the man.

Of course, none of these chocolates could be bought in Croatia without forking over a considerable sum of cash or valuables. Even soldiers had chocolate rations when they sat in the trenches. Such is life after the Great War.

"Imperial maidens, especially the Germanians." A youth said with a meek smile, prompting all the women to glare in his direction. "They're very well endowed and are ideal wives. Not to say Croat women couldn't compete, but I want to state that the Empire has given us a lot of options in terms of romance…"

Pavelich suddenly remembered a female comrade in Illdoa, an Illyrian Germanian with the largest breasts in the entire infantry regiment. If he were a lesser man, he would have gladly taken her as a mistress; a sentiment that all the other men in his battalion shared. It was truly heartbreaking that Katarin got blown apart by a 210 mm artillery shell during an Ildoan trench assault.

"Imperial roads." Another shouted. "The Empire built the roads so smoothly that you can roll a marble from Agram to Wien. Only a Serb can turn a highway into a goat path!"

"Imperial pensions." An old farmer loudly grunted. "The King Alexios only gave me a couple of pfennigs while he hoarded the rest of the money for his palace in Beograd. At least the Kaiser knew the value of hard labor."

"The Federal Postal Service." A different hand was raised. "I used to send letters to all four corners of Europe and have them delivered in less than a week. Now, when a Croat sends a letter to his sister, it goes to Beograd for inspection first!"

"Standardized education."

"The Football League. We Croats are forced to play against Serbs with Serb referees. At least in the Empire, we played against Magyars, Pullskans, Osterrians, Danes, and Lotheirans."

"Imperial patents."

"Public safety."

"Cheap coal and firewood."

Pavelich slammed his fist on the podium once more. This was supposed to be a rally for Croat nationalism, not a party of grievances; his people were supposed to acknowledge the freedom and glory they could gain from independence!

"Enough! Yes, I admit that the Empire has granted us these boons, but do not for even a minute mistake these intentions as pure. The Germanians seek to dominate us! They made us into lambs being led into a slaughterhouse. Our brothers and sisters have come home ruined and bloodied from the failures of Berun. They left us at the yoke of Serb tyranny."

"To be fair to the Germanians for a moment," Radikan spoke up from behind, "It was the Allied Powers that placed us under the rule of the Serbs."

"Which side are you on, traitor?" Pavelich spat out the last word.

"On the side of peace and prosperity for all Croats. We all are."

Pavelich turned to face his audience once more.

"Despite all of these pleasures that the Germanians have delivered to Croatia. Never, and I mean NEVER, has the Empire ever done anything to aid us that did not directly benefit themselves. They want us as worshippers of Imperial greatness, and never saw us as equals."

The church was silent once more until a Croat clergyman broke the silence.

"The Germanians did help us during the 1444 Crusade of Varna despite their internal upheaval. Together with the Magyars and Pullskans, they defeated the Rumelian Army and contained the Muslim expansion within Hellas. If it weren't for their aid, we would all be living under the Rumelians for nearly five centuries."

A wave of agreement swept through the congregation once more. Better to be oppressed by a Christian brother than a foreign religion. The Rumelians taxed nonbelievers after all.

"The Empire gave us Tanya von Degurechaff. We have a champion that can save us from foreign oppression."

The mention of her name nearly caused his nerves to explode. Pavelich immediately signaled to his men to escort that traitor from the church and dispose of him.

This has gone too far. The Devil was not even in Illdoa yet her influence has managed to claw its way to infect the minds of his people. This must be stopped immediately.

God willing, she must die.

In Pavelich's mind, he initially thought of sending one of his men to strike her down. Someone brave, fanatical, and crafting with a dagger. But she is a killer…he may have to consider alternatives to eliminate her permanently.

Something fiery…and explosive.

That would put all his current plots in jeopardy if he shifted all his attention to her alone. But no price is too high to pay for an independent Croatia.

With all the comforts of first class to myself, I felt rather optimistic for a change of pace. I could finally get on to fulfilling my agreement with Schlage by helping his associates stabilize Yugoslavia. Of course, now that I have crossed the border, I realize I should have tried to grasp a bit more information from the DDP leader. Fix Yugoslavia, yes, but how do I know who is a friend of Schlage or not? Do I just wait for them to share or confine their past association with me once I arrive?

Regardless, I passed the time by drafting a petition to Chancellor Berning. One in regards to the formal recognition of universal human rights and dignity. An International Charter of Human Rights, to be exact. Though to be perfectly transparent with myself, I was am not well-versed in every detail or its amendments in the 1948 document. To compensate for this black hole, I had to pull my knowledge from Article 13 of the Japanese Constitution.

Which itself was copied from the American Bill of Rights.

It all goes back to America…At least the Unified States will be mollified knowing I hold their precious document in high regard.

First things first: "Article 1: All of the people shall be respected as individuals. Individuals shall not be deprived of their right to Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness by the orders of their state and intergovernmental bodies."

An excellent start! With this principle recognized by Germania, and by extension, Europe and the rest of the world, there would be no more senseless killings and violent reprisals. Once this charter had been accepted by the global community, the Steel Legion in Dacia would be brought to justice for their vile and cruel genocide.

Of course, not to discount the current Germanian constitution when it has these principles, but Chancellor Berning ought to push for a global, universal recognition of human rights. I may have criticisms of American hegemony, but championing liberal ideas is not one of them.

"Article 2: All people shall be recognized equally under international law and not face discrimination based on race, creed, gender, social status, and familial origin."

Perhaps I should add sexuality as part of the list since my home country was facing a growing movement of gay rights advocates. By nipping this concern in the bud, we could skip the debate altogether and move on with our lives and careers. After all, Denmark, if I remember the news correctly, was the eighth European country to legalize gay marriage in Europe.

If Prime Minister Stromming was anything to go by, the Danes in this world were a calm and reasonable people. I doubt things would be any different…

Though Chancellor Berning was a centrist-right Papal conservative. He would see right through me…and I would rather not cause him another scandal. Now that I thought about it more, it

would be best to skip the topic for a future debate. Germania may not be ready yet to address this issue for the LGBTQ community, but Daneland might be.

"Article 3: People have the inalienable right to a democratic form of government; the inalienable right to elect and dismiss their public leaders. Universal adult suffrage shall be guaranteed.
The secrecy of the ballot shall not be violated. The individual voter shall not be coerced to vote nor be answerable, publicly or privately, to the vote they made."

Pretty self-explanatory. I see no reason for Berning to reject this outright. How can he? We both want the same thing. Even Schlage will agree to this clause. As for the Allied Powers…well, they already practice this principle. Can they really complain if Germania chooses to establish it as a universal concept?

The Empire is dead. They have nothing to fear.

"Article 4: Every person shall have the right of peaceful petition for the compensation of damage, for the removal of public officials, for the enactment, repeal or amendment of laws, ordinances or regulations and other matters; nor shall any person be in any way discriminated or criminalized against for sponsoring such a petition.
The state shall not infringe on an individual's right to protest and to inform the common citizenry."

There should be a third part to this last statement, I feel. I shall find inspiration and advice among the educated professors in the DDP once I return. Perhaps the right to an education?

No, that should be its own category. I quickly wrote it down as Article 5.

My musings were interrupted when a sharply dressed server gently opened my door to reveal a bottle of vintage wine. It was a brand I was not overtly familiar with, but it originated from the mountain slopes of the Osterrian Alps. I suppose that counted for something.

"I didn't order anything," I told him.

It would be very unprofessional to tell Schlage that I had written my treatise under the influence.

The man smiled regardless. "That is fine. Consider it a gift for your service."

Another fanboy who wanted to pull the purse strings to accommodate me. I relented and replied with a signature smile of my own. I directed him to place the wine on the nearby table, as I had no intention to indulge in any alcohol tonight.

Strangely enough, the gentleman closed and locked the door behind him before proceeding to follow my direction. I initially considered it a quirk of the man until my eyes caught the

unmistakable glint of a blade gripped in his gloved hand. I let go of my draft when he turned with a harsh determination in his eyes.

Not a second to waste, he lunged to impale my throat upon his dagger. If it weren't for my wallet, gun, notebook, and other assortments I stored in my purse, it would not have been thick enough to block a portion of the blade.

With my hands gripping my makeshift shield, I threw up my feet and kicked his knees with the sharp heels of my shoes. The man groaned in pain, imbalance, but still determined to use his weight to use his size and mass to overpower my arms.

I aimed at his crotch next, sending his voice into a new octave, before twisting my purse away from my face. He collapsed into the luxury seats across from mine, trying to regain his bearings.

He ripped his dagger out of my purse and prepared for another strike, but I didn't give him a chance when I ran towards the table at the last second. He smashed his face against the couch like a raging bull. The man recovered fast as he turned around to charge.

Thinking quickly, I grabbed the neck of the wine bottle to use its body to parry his dagger before striking his chin and cheek. He stumbled in his steps, the blade nearly slipping from his palms, when I struck him in the forehead with such force that the wine bottle shattered.

The front of my dress was slightly drenched, yet I did not relent. His head was bowed low enough that I went to slash his exposed neck from the bottle's jagged edges. It was a clean swipe through his artery and his blood squirted out like a fountain.

Blood reached the ceiling, caught on the window, landed on the table, the seats, and, most annoying of all, on my clothes.

I cursed myself for overperformance. I should have spared the server so I could at least interrogate him for his motive.

The fact that he locked the door…was he expecting intervention or reinforcements? I wonder what I did in Osterry that warranted an attempted murder. Perhaps he was a communist?

I retrieved my gun from my purse before gently unlocking the door and peering down the hall.

It was empty. Quiet even.

How strange.

I knew that the train made a brief stop in Croatia, near the border between Osterry and Yugoslavia, and saw a great many people departing from the train cars, but there were still a considerable number of passengers who got on.

I turned around and immediately came face-to-face with a middle-aged woman armed with a revolver. She had a slight shock on her face before quickly recovering to hush my surprise.

"This may be a bit too sudden," she spoke quickly, "But we don't have much time. Just know that I am on your side."

"Are you one of Elene's girls?" I inquired suspiciously, keeping my gun raised at her even as she lowered her own.

"Who?" she remarked absently, walking over to open the exterior door and glancing ahead. "I am Martha Kaertnoc, Albish intelligence."

"You work for Londonium?" I inquired, "I didn't know they wanted to protect me."

"Yes, I do and no, they don't," She grimly corrected. "MI6 wants you dead, as do the Francois."

"Ah." I nodded, understanding the situation slightly better. "Who is that then?"

I pointed to the corpse.

Kaertnoc turned around to close and lock the door. "Someone vengeful. The Francois hired him to take you out."

"Is there more?"

"Yes. There are a dozen Albish agents aboard assigned to assassinate you," the woman explained, "I am one of them."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked.

"It's personal," She stated, "Listen, two cars ahead, there is a contact waiting for you. I had identified her as an informant for the conservative establishment in Berun. Her name is Ursula. Her spot is marked by a yellow flag depicting the black dragon hanging from the window."

"And how am I supposed to reach her?"

Kaertnoc pointed outwards.

"Climb out and use the exterior railings as hand bars."

"Are you insane?!" I could not believe what she was suggesting.

"It's the only way. Ursula will explain everything," she replied. "Besides, my plan to distract my comrades by telling you jumped off the train to run and hide in the windmill.

Sure enough, I looked out and saw a windmill and a farmstead in the distance; its details more apparent at each passing second. Suddenly, I heard an entourage of boots heading towards my cabin.

Shit. I didn't have a choice.

I grabbed my purse and shoved my writings inside before throwing my luggage over my shoulder.

Just as I moved to grab the railings outside, I turned to look at Kaertnoc.

"How do I know this isn't a trap?" I inquired. This is all too conveniently fast for the turncoat. She is armed still; once I grab onto the railings, she would have every opportunity to shoot me right then and there.

"Because this is vengeance, for my dead brothers and raped sisters in Flanders." She growled, "I may work for Albion, but my loyalty is to you. I will not give Parisee the pleasure of your demise."

"Go!" The double agent shouted, grabbed the fallen dagger, wiped away the blood, and thrusted it into her abdomen. She then fell and used her own body to barricade the room from within. "I'll buy you as much time as I can."

The interior door jolted from the pounding. Shouting followed.

My rotten misfortune!

Just when this train ride was getting pleasant.

With wind blowing at my face, as fast as a hurricane, I moved forward, hoping that a tree branch wouldn't knock me off. Sure enough, the woman was correct: almost all the windows in the cars ahead were covered by curtains, save for one that had a banner flapping in the breeze.

Of all the dangerous maneuvers I had to contend with during the Great War, this has got to be the most inconvenient. The metal was too cold for my fingers, and my feet scratched against exterior walls in the vain attempt to get a solid footing.

"DAMN YOU BEING…X!!!" I raged against the howling wind, the blinking stars, and the crescent moon that mocked my predicament. "I JUST WANT TO WRITE IN PEACE!"

Still, I proceeded with my predicament, even when my fingers started to scream in agony. Losing my grip would only spell a miserable end to a rather spectacular and industrious life; I would sooner encounter hitmen rather than have my broken body found lying somewhere in a ditch.

In the distance, I heard the faint crack of a gunshot. The assassins must have shot the lock open…

I needed to hurry up or risk getting caught in this miserable state.

I shouted more profanities at Being X, every word of damnation under the starry night, before I finally reached the safe room. My fist pounded against the window, threatening to crack the glass out of sheer frustration, and the car door promptly slid open.

Two pairs of hands grabbed me; one young and female, the other from an aging man.

"I hope for your loyalty and discretion," I grumbled weakly, crashing into the velvet seat as my strength finally departed.

"Heil Degurechaff," the young girl replied, raising her right arm before helping me adjust into a more comfortable sitting position. "You need not worry about treachery here."

The older man with the toothbrush mustache repeated her gesture before he quickly closed the train door.

"When I was told that you had to find refuge with us," he remarked with a soft, bitter laugh in his voice, "I expected the other door to open…"

"Believe me," I panted, "I should have opted to face my would-be killers in combat…"

"Killers?" The middle-aged man looked rather confused before glancing at the girl who took her place next to me. "I was informed that it was a police squad enacting your arrest."

"It seems our allies have been misled," she shrugged. "Or compromised. Because there is an army of Serb police awaiting Argent Silver in Beograd."

"Lovely," I grumbled. Here, I thought Schlage informed his associates to use me to assist in their national stabilization efforts. "Pardon me, however, I would like to know the identities of my benefactor."

"Right. I am Lieutenant Colonel Artrick Gustavous Roose Flene," he performed the traditional Imperial military salute to greet me. "President Rudensdorf sent me."

"Rudensdorf?" I narrowed my eyes.

"Regent Horvath as well."

"Horvath too?"

"And Pilsud."

"Pilsud?! Is there another aging army despot that cares about my well-being?"

"General Ugar."

"He is not a despot. Daneland is still a democracy."

"For now. He won the loyalty of the Dane Army and plans to march on Kobenhavn."

I was about to retort rather violently when the young girl introduced herself as Ursula Grantz.

Wait. Grantz.

I looked to examine her features: blonde hair, aqua green eyes, youthful freckles…

"My older brother served in your battalion." She stated, "You remember Vooren?"

"Always." I gave a tired smile. "I hope he shared some good words about me."

"More than that. I adored every word." Grantz hummed, "He has written his autobiography. I kept a copy to give you."

She reached into her handbag and passed me the spare, clean and unblemished as if she grabbed it fresh off the printing press, before grabbing her handkerchief to wipe the blood splatter and wine off my face. The cloth was immediately tossed out the window.

Die Grosstefeuerwehr.

How humble of him. I'll have to read it later.

"So," I raised my head. "What is the plan? There are assassins on this train and a jail cell awaiting me in the capital."

"Simple." Flene stated, "We turn back and rejoin our comrades in Germania."

"And return empty-handed?" I shook my head. "I promised party leader Schlage that I would help Yugoslavia stabilize its democratic institutions."

"To be blunt, Argent Silver," he replied, "Fuck Schlage. Fuck the Progressives. This whole journey is a trap. The ruling coalition, what remains of it, has betrayed your trust by colluding with the Allied Powers. They offer your personhood for a tremendous amount of concessions, perhaps a revocation of Triano."

"With respect, Lt. Colonel. I call your claims complete horseshit. I absolutely refuse to believe that the moderates would stoop so low…"

"Argent Silver! Please! This is no charade."

"Commandant," Grantz said, trying to soothe my growing rage. "If I may…"

I turned towards the girl in irked anticipation.

"To make things brief, Germania is on the verge of a civil war. Ever since you left, the Kozis and the Nazis have begun an insurgency in Rhineland and Southern Germania respectively. Though they have not declared an open revolution, we reckon that is because they are more focused on killing each other than overthrowing the Weimar Republic."

"Just crush them," I remarked blankly. "We still have the Reichswehr."

"The Defense Secretary made it clear to Chancellor Berning that he will not move against the radicals," Flene explained. "The Reichswehr is in mutinous revolt. They will not listen to the directives of the Reichstag or the office of the Chancellery."

"What?!"

Lergen wouldn't…he is married to his job. An apolitical workaholic and careerist!

"We're here to retrieve you." The young woman looked all over my body. "And to give you a clean set of clothes."

"Retrieve?"

The blonde girl turned melancholic for a moment.

"The KSA, though growing exponentially, is experiencing…discontentment of your absence."

"Rumors of a mutiny." Flene remarked, "The uniformed men prefer not to have a Judean halfbreed in charge of your movement."

Even if his description was brutally honest, I still did not appreciate the cold derision in his voice when he spat the word. I corrected his behavior when I curled my fingers into a fist and rammed

my rage into his groin. He crumpled into his seat with his back stretched into an arch, groaning all the way.

"So long as you are in my presence and speaking to me, you will refrain from making crude and exclusionary comments when describing a certain ethnic community or any in that matter. Do you understand?"

"Yes…" Flene whimpered when I grabbed hold of his mustache and threatened to rip it off.

"Good. The respectful term is 'biracial' or 'mixed-heritage' when describing someone like Elena. You would do well to remember that."

The lieutenant colonel nodded in muted agreement.

"Interesting terminology." Grantz hummed. "But regardless, you understand the urgency, correct?"

"I understand well enough." I huffed, "I'll write some letters to send back home and get these idiots to see reason."

"But Argent Silver, they want you to return immediately! They need you."

"No, they need my face so they can plaster it on every wall and poster to garner public support. What they want is a propaganda horse to parade on the streets. I will return but on my own volition. I must fulfill my agreement with Schlage."

"Saving Yugoslavian democracy?" Grantz didn't look convinced, daring to meet my iron gaze. "Pardon me but from my observations, your actions hardly qualify as democratic."

"Which is why I have to continue with my mission," I spoke harshly. "I need to show that I am more than just a military meathead or rabble-rouser. I want to help the Progressive Bloc succeed; the only way for them to trust me is through helping their associates."

"Bu-but!-"

"No! I will not abandon an assignment halfway."

Besides, they could be exaggerating the situation in Germania. The newspapers produced similar apocalyptic predictions and they have an agenda to push. There is no distinction yet between propaganda and unbiased news.

The Allied Powers may want to eliminate me but they are limited by the need to maintain discretion. If I die in a car accident or slip and break my neck falling down the stairs, they can

pass it off as providence. They can hate me all they want yet to eliminate a celebrated war hero through unscrupulous means is an act of cowardice and disrespect of the highest order.

One loose lip. One slip-up. One smoking gun and the Allied Powers will set a precedent of vengeance killings by radical Germanians wishing to settle the score.

No. I am protected by my fame. They will have to arrest me first. They can try; Lergen, Schlage, and Zettour promised me friends in Beograd. I'll be protected by the Yugoslav government once my usefulness has been vouched for.

"That is all sound and good," Flene spoke up once more, albeit with more reservation. "But what are we to do once we arrive in Beograd? Hell, what do we do with the assassins on board this train?"

Upon hearing his words, I reached into my purse, my fingers poking through the incision the dagger made, before wrapping my hand around the cold, wooden grip of my pistol. Not counting the munitions inside, I had two more magazines for a firefight.

"They want my head?" I flashed a grin, "Let them come and claim it."

"I like the way you think," Grantz nodded along, reaching down to grab her violin case and reveal a dismantled Chicago Typewriter. She immediately began reassembling the submachine gun with practiced fingers. "My brother will be so envious of me."

Author's Note: After one and a half years, we finally made it to the Yugoslavia Arc. Tanya's struggles is yet to be over.